

CHAPTER 3.

THE HUMILIATION OF OUR MEDIATOR

Jesus Christ was harassed. The Jewish leaders would often track him down in the places where he was preaching, asking him questions to trap him or embarrass him in front of the crowds. However, Jesus is certainly not the only one in the history of the world who has been harassed. Many other people have been, and still are, pursued, badgered, and hounded.

Jesus Christ was publicly mocked and falsely accused, even though he was innocent. Again, the leaders of God's own people had a leading role in this as they suggested that he was in league with the devil (Matt 12:24) and guilty of rabble-rousing against the Roman emperor (Luke 23:2). Both insinuations were patently false. However, it must also be said, that Jesus was not the first person to be falsely accused and he will not be the last either.

Jesus Christ was physically abused. He was spat upon, beaten, flogged, and finally crucified. The pain must have been unimaginably severe. Still, many others have endured unspeakable physical pain and torture, not to mention psychological and emotional scarring from all kinds of different abuse. Rivers of human tears have been absorbed into the soil of this fallen world.

Considering all of this, we cannot help but ask, "What makes our Saviour unique in his suffering?" That he suffered greatly is undeniable. That his suffering was greater than, or different from, many other sufferers may

not be immediately obvious to all. The key difference is in the identity of the Sufferer. Many have suffered bitterly, but only Jesus suffered as our Mediator, who is not only human and divine (see chapter 1), but also holds office as the Chief Prophet, the Only High Priest, and the Eternal King (see chapter 2). Moreover, when Christ's true identity is confessed, then the true depth of his redemptive work also becomes evident.

Christ's work is typically divided into two states: his humiliation and his exaltation. The word *state* might sound a little bit odd. However, in this context it is related to the word *status*, and it refers to someone's official position or situation, especially with respect to those who have legal authority. For instance, someone may go to another country to study at a university. The *circumstance* of his life is that he wants to gain a wider educational experience. However, according to the government of that country, his current *status* is that he is a visitor with a student visa who may only stay in the country for a certain length of time.

In a similar fashion, our Lord Jesus Christ went through many different circumstances: hunger, isolation, fatigue, and injustice. However, to understand his redemptive work, we need to look beyond the circumstances and consider what his official status was before God the Father during all those events. For this reason we speak of the states of Christ's work. The clearest passage in Scripture about the two states is Philippians 2, which speaks of his state of humiliation (vv. 6–8) and his state of exaltation (vv. 9–11). Other texts that could be mentioned are 1 Timothy 3:16 and Hebrews 2:9. Moreover, as the Nicene Creed reminds us, our Mediator did all of this “for us men and our salvation.” That is the glorious sound of the true gospel: Christ did what he did *for us* and *for our salvation!*

OUR MEDIATOR'S INCARNATION: THE WORD BECAME FLESH

In the Apostles' Creed the church confesses that Jesus Christ “was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.” The Nicene Creed affirms the same teaching when it says that he “came down from heaven and became incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was

made man.” There are three, closely connected truths here, each of them miraculous in their own right. First, the Christ child was conceived in the womb of Mary by a special, mysterious act of the Holy Spirit. Luke 1:35 tells us that the Holy Spirit was involved, but we cannot fathom exactly how he did it. Second, the Christ child was born to a virgin. Amazingly, children have been born to infertile women. Just think of Isaac who was born to Sarah (Gen 18:11; Rom 4:19) and Samson who was born to Manoah’s wife (Judg 13:2). However, no child has ever been born to a woman who has never had sexual relations with a man—no one, that is, except Jesus Christ. Third, the unfathomable result of this mysterious conception is that God’s only-begotten Son became man. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Until the incarnation, there were two beings who, in many different ways, appeared to be incompatible: God and man, the Infinite and the finite, the Almighty and the creature from the dust. Yet, at the incarnation, those two were miraculously united into one person: God’s only-begotten Son also became a man.

For some, even those who claim to be Christians, the virgin birth is simply too much to believe. They may still speak highly of Jesus, his teaching, and his willingness to undergo suffering in such a humble manner, but they also teach that Jesus was conceived by the sexual union of Mary and a man, whether that was Joseph or someone else. Those who refuse to believe in the virgin birth are elevating their common sense higher than God’s sovereign power. Since God can create the heavens and the earth out of nothing (Heb 11:3), he can also cause conception without the involvement of a male human being. It takes as much faith to believe the second as it does the first. However, even if our common sense cannot explain it, God’s Word still reveals it. The prophet Isaiah announced it beforehand. “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son” (Isa 7:14). The gospel writer Matthew confirms it when this prophecy was fulfilled. “Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (Matt 1:18).

Taking this a step further, those who refuse to believe in the virgin birth also need consider what they are actually giving up. They are not just abandoning one isolated doctrine; they are walking away from the very heart of the gospel. The virgin birth was necessary because God's own Son had to take upon himself real human flesh. As soon as the angel Gabriel announces the virgin birth, he immediately adds, "Therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). In short, if there was no virgin birth, then Jesus was merely another human being—perhaps an exceptional man but, in the end, nothing more than a man. If Jesus was no more than a man, then we may well have a hero, but we definitely do not have a Mediator and Deliverer, and then we are to be pitied more than all people (1 Cor 15:19). One of two things must be true: either we confess the virgin birth, the two natures of Christ, and eternal salvation through this Mediator, or we deny the virgin birth, reject his two natures, and leave ourselves with nothing more than a Great Example to admire and follow. It is one or the other. There is no scriptural room for mixing and matching, according to personal or intellectual preference.

This brings to the fore another, intriguing question that has been debated. Would God's own Son have been conceived and born as man, if there had never been a fall into sin? Putting it differently, is the incarnation necessary because of how things were created or due to the way things became after the fall? Of course, there is a speculative element to this question. We can talk about *if* the fall never happened, but the miserable fact of the matter is that it has happened. Period. Generally speaking, speculative theology is something that is best avoided.

However, it is beneficial to consider briefly what Scripture says on this topic. The angel who appeared to Joseph clearly put Jesus' conception and birth within the context of sin. He explains, "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). Moreover, as the Lamb of God (John 1:29), Jesus came to fulfill, in his own body, all the Old Testament animal sacrifices, which were offered up for sin. In fact, this Lamb and his sacrifice for sin were already ordained "from before the foundation of the world"

(Rev 13:8). Consistently in Scripture, the incarnation of God's Son is presented as God's answer to humankind's deepest problem: sin. Those who speak speculatively of an incarnation even if there was no sin may well be thinking that the physical creation was, from the very beginning, somehow prone to distract people from pure, spiritual thinking. Some Greek philosophers, such as Plato, thought along these lines. If that is the underlying assumption, then the incarnate Son of God becomes a mediator between the inherently evil matter and the most ideal God. However, we know that in the beginning creation was "very good" (Gen 1:31). The original creation did not need a Saviour, but the sinful man certainly does!

Two other errors have crept into the church's teaching about the incarnation. The first is a theory called *kenosis*, which is a Greek word that means *emptying*. In this discussion, people usually refer to Philippians 2:6–7 where the apostle Paul writes that Christ "who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself." Teachers of *kenosis* concentrate on the last words: "emptied himself." They teach that in his incarnation Christ emptied himself of part, or even all, of his divinity. In other words, they teach that he gave up being fully divine in order to become fully human. However, in Philippians 2:7–8 the apostle Paul explains what he means by "emptied himself," and it includes "taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" In sum, Christ emptied himself of his dignity not his divinity.

The second error is, in a sense, the opposite one. Briefly put, this teaching advances the idea that already after his birth, but especially after his resurrection, Christ's human nature took on more and more divine attributes. Divine properties such as omnipresence were transferred over to our Mediator's human nature. In this way, Christ's physical body becomes present everywhere after his ascension. However, such a teaching runs against passages such as Acts 1:11 where the angels said to the apostles that Jesus had been taken "up from you into heaven." In other words, at his ascension Jesus did not disperse his human nature everywhere; rather he left here (i.e., the earth) and went there (i.e., to heaven).

The incarnation, which the church commemorates at Christmas, is certainly a redemptive act worth celebrating. On the night that Christ was born, the angels said, “Glory to God in the highest” (Luke 2:14) and we should, too. Yet, in our celebrations we must be careful that the humanness of Christ’s birth does not diminish, in any way, his divinity. By the same token, we must not let his divinity, in any way, undermine the teaching that he “took upon himself *true* human nature from the flesh and blood of the virgin Mary” and so became “like his brothers in every respect, yet without sin” (LD 14, Q&A 35).

Maintaining that doctrinal balance about *who* Christ is helps us to see, even more accurately, *what* he did for us in his incarnation. Not only did he become our Mediator, but his sinless conception and birth also covers over our original sin (LD 14, Q&A 36). Every day our sinful nature “continually streams forth like water welling up from this woeful source” (BC 15). Indeed, glory to God in the highest that the Word became flesh and so provided us with a clean, white covering for this fountain of foul transgression.

OUR MEDIATOR’S SUFFERING: A MAN OF SORROWS

Everyone suffers. Some suffer more than others do, but everyone has to endure hardship of one kind or the other. Jesus suffered, too, and for this reason he is able “to sympathize with our weaknesses” (Heb 2:18; 4:15). However, our Mediator is much more than a good Sympathizer; he is also a gracious Saviour.

In order to appreciate this more fully, we need to see the unique character of his suffering. In the first place, Christ’s sufferings are unique because the agony of his death was with him all the days of his life. You might even say, Christ was born to die—and he realized it, too. As the writer to the Hebrews explains, Christ came into the world knowing that his own body would be sacrificed for our sins and yet saying, “Behold, I have come to do your will, O God” (Heb 10:7). Many people endure suffering grudgingly; our Mediator stepped forward and volunteered for it. That already makes him stand out from the mass of miserable suffer-

ers on this globe. Moreover, he was constantly reminded of the sacrificial death that awaited him. Just as he was about to enter public office through the anointing of the Holy Spirit, John the Baptist set this truth before him, calling him “the Lamb of God” (John 1:29, 35). Also, Jesus himself told his disciples about it repeatedly (Matt 16:21; Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22; 17:25). His impending death was always on his mind.

Secondly, many people suffer because of difficult circumstances or, quite simply, their own foolish mistakes. However, since Christ is the sinless (Heb 4:15) and holy one (Luke 1:35), he did not make any mistakes, and he certainly did not deserve to suffer under any adversity. Yet he did suffer as the High Priest after the order of Melchizedek who offered up his own life for our sins (Heb 9:26; 10:10). In a word, Christ’s suffering was vicarious, that is, done as a substitute who stood in our place. The well-known prophecy in Isaiah 53 reinforces this by moving back and forth constantly between third person singular pronouns (e.g., he, him, his) and first person plural pronouns (e.g., we, us, our). This interchange of pronouns culminates in this statement: “The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa 53:6).

The Heidelberg Catechism sums it up in this way: “During all the time he lived on earth, but especially at the end, Christ bore in body and soul the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race” (Q&A 37). By way of comparison, the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah immersed themselves deeply in the mire of immorality (Gen 18:20–21). When the holy wrath of God was poured out upon them, there was, to be sure, unimaginably horrible suffering. The LORD rained down burning sulfur on those cities and dense smoke, like a furnace, arose from their charred ruins (Gen 19:24, 28). Yet if that was God’s wrath against the citizens of just two cities, what is the intensity of God’s wrath against the sins of the whole human race? Incomprehensible and inexpressible! Our Mediator suffered *that* wrath of God, and he did it for us and in our place. No one else can claim that.

Thirdly, we must not forget that the God whose wrath Christ suffered was not a foreigner to him. On the contrary, this was his own Father.

Before his state of humiliation began, the Son lived together with his Father in perfect, divine, and heavenly glory. They loved each other with an eternal and perfect love. They lived and worked together in unfailing harmony. However, the longer Christ lived on this earth, the more the bliss of that communion was replaced by the agony of God's wrath. On the cross, Christ's own words expressed it best when he said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46) At that moment the Son addressed him as "my God," but the horror of God's wrath was only compounded by the knowledge that, for Christ, "my God" was also his own, eternal Father.

Fourthly, as the Apostles' Creed emphasizes, Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate. Pilate was a Roman governor, appointed by Emperor Tiberius. However, as Romans 13:1 teaches us, "There is no authority except from God." That is also true for Pilate. When Christ was taken into Pilate's court, he stepped into a legal proceeding that was ultimately supervised by the Governor of governors, God himself. This legal aspect of Christ's suffering is crucial. One day everyone must enter a legal proceeding in the heavenly courtroom of God. This is vividly described in Revelation 20:11–15. In that final court case, only those whose names are in the Lamb's book of life are acquitted and declared innocent (Rev 20:15 with Rev 13:8; 21:27). The only reason that these saints, though guilty of sin themselves, are declared innocent is that their Saviour, though innocent, was declared guilty in Pilate's court (LD 15, Q&A 38).

These four reasons, outlined above, should supply ample proof that Christ's suffering was unique. At the same time, as the Nicene Creed explains, this was all necessary "for us men and our salvation." In fact, through his suffering he obtained three precious gifts for us: "the grace of God" which replaced the wrath of God, "righteousness" instead of condemnation on judgment day, and "eternal life" in lieu of eternal death (LD 15, Q&A 37). In this way, the prophecy of Isaiah 53 was fulfilled: "the man of sorrows" (v. 3) who was "crushed for our iniquities" (v. 5), also received "a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong" (v. 12). Intense suffering for him has resulted in eternal blessings for us.

OUR MEDIATOR'S DEATH: REDEMPTION FROM THE CURSE OF THE LAW

The fall into sin brought a lot of hardship into this world. People started avoiding the truth and accusing others instead (Gen 3:12). Giving birth to children became very painful (Gen 3:16a) and working in the fields became very frustrating (Gen 3:17–18). Marital bliss was replaced by spousal competition (Gen 3:16b), and instead of loving each other, siblings became jealous of each other (Gen 4:3–5). Yet, of all the miserable results brought about by sin, death still stands front and centre. This is the warning that the LORD God gave right from the start: “Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen 2:17). This warning was also the very thing that Satan tried to neutralize when the father of lies spoke these misleading words: “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God” (Gen 3:4–5). After Adam and Eve gave into Satan’s temptation and sinned, the devil’s lie was exposed when the LORD once again confirmed that, now that they had sinned, they would surely die. He said to Adam, “For you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19).

The grievous reality of death is repeatedly and unmistakably mentioned in the chapters immediately following the fall into sin. Genesis 4 describes two murders: Cain killing Abel and Lamech slaying a young man. Genesis 5 is the Bible’s first genealogy, but it could also be called the Bible’s first necrology because its constant refrain is: “And he died.” Finally, in Genesis 6–9 the LORD God punishes the whole world with death by a flood. Only Noah and his family, eight people in all, are rescued. Why such widespread death? The Holy Spirit gives this reason: “And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth” (Gen 6:12). Thus, the message is clear: the wages of sin is death—not just hardship and broken relationships, but death (Rom 6:23).

Having said this, God’s Word also distinguishes between different kinds of death. There is, of course, physical death when dust returns to dust

(Gen 2:19). The apostle also speaks of spiritual death in Ephesians 2:1 where he writes, “You were dead in the trespasses and sins.” Finally, there is eternal death, which is the equivalent of suffering in the everlasting punishment of hell (Rev 20:14). All three of these deaths are the result of sin.

This also explains why Christ had to be humiliated to the point of death. Anything less would have missed the mark. Anything else would have failed to rescue us from our sins. Just as surely as no sacrifice in the Old Testament was complete unless the animal was actually slaughtered, so also our redemption would have been left unfinished if our Mediator had not actually breathed his last (Luke 23:46). The Catechism sums up this truth with these words: “Why was it necessary for Christ to humble himself even unto death? Because of the justice and truth of God satisfaction for our sins could be made in no other way than by the death of the Son of God” (LD 16, Q&A 40).

Yet there is more. Just as surely as salvation had to come through our Mediator’s death, and not in any other way, so he also had to die by crucifixion, and not by any other means. Here we need to bring back the truth of the covenant into our considerations. The LORD and his people are joined together, not merely by an association of friendship, but by a solemn covenant. By this everlasting covenant the LORD declares to us, “I am your husband” (Jer 31:32) and you, collectively as my people, will be my wife. Therefore, when God’s people sin, they do not commit their misdeeds in a vacuum, but always within that precious relationship of the covenant. Sadly, though, this truth only compounds the atrocity of sin. It is one thing to sin as such. It is quite another, though, to sin against the Heavenly Spouse of your marriage covenant. This makes it all the more understandable that while the LORD does bestow covenant blessings on those who obey (Deut 28:1–14), he also sends covenant curses upon those who persist in disobedience (Deut 28:15–68). After all, covenants should not be taken lightly.

Precisely here, then, Bethlehem and Golgotha meet each other face-to-face. Prior to Christ’s birth the angel explicitly said to Joseph that the

child was to be called Jesus “for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). Please note that the angel did not say people, generally speaking, but specifically *his* people, who are the people of God’s covenant. Since the one born in Bethlehem was to save his people who commit transgressions *within the covenant*, he will also have to bear the curse of the covenant for them. Enduring the complete curse can only be accomplished by dying on the cross. As the apostle Paul explains, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (Gal 3:13; Deut 21:23).

So, by dying on the cross, our Mediator rescued us from all three kinds of death plus the curse of the covenant, and he did so in one single, sovereign stroke. As a result of his death, our physical death is no longer a payment for sin, but an entrance into eternal life (LD 16, Q&A 42). Through his death, our sinful nature, which leaves us dead in sin and transgression (Eph 2:1), is crucified with Christ. Believing in his death for us, we receive everlasting life instead of eternal death (Rom 6:23). Finally, because of his death on the cross, the curse that hung over our heads was laid on his shoulders and his soul instead (Q&A 39).

OUR MEDIATOR’S DEATH AND HIS THREEFOLD OFFICE

During his crucifixion and death, our Mediator was conscious of his official responsibilities as prophet, priest, and king. While on the cross, Christ did not withdraw into himself only to deal personally with his suffering. He also spoke seven times (Matt 27:46; Luke 23:34, 43, 46; John 19:26–27, 28, 30). Each saying was short, but prophetically powerful. Right until his last breath, he remained our Chief Prophet and Teacher, making the most of every moment and teaching about the all-important issues of salvation in this life and the next.

As our High Priest, Christ not only made a sacrifice, but he made himself to be that sacrifice which was offered once for all for the sins of his people. Not only that, but as a priest, even in his final hours, he made inter-

cession for those around, also for the Roman soldiers, praying, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what do” (Luke 23:34).

Finally, during the whole time that he was dying on the cross, a sign hung over his head, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews” (Matt 27:37). The Jewish chief priests tried to have the sign changed, but Pilate refused (John 19:19–22). The words on this sign were truer than Pilate himself realized. For as King, not only of the Jews but also of the Gentiles, Christ was fighting on that cross to conquer sin, death, and Satan. As our eternal King, he was victorious in that battle.

OUR MEDIATOR’S BURIAL: HIS ATONING DEATH WAS REAL

The Apostles’ Creed also makes separate mention of Christ’s burial. Often this aspect of Christ’s humiliation is overlooked. Indeed, the Catechism also treats it in a very concise fashion. “Why was he buried? His burial testified that he had really died” (LD 16, Q&A 41). However, there is more than meets the eye in these few words. Anyone who has experienced the death of a loved one knows that, at first, the death feels more surreal than real. The death has occurred, but the full impact of that death has yet to settle in. The burial of the loved one’s body is an important step in moving from surreal to real. It is a significant part of the grieving process.

However, as you might expect, things are different when we speak of Christ’s burial. He was not buried merely as a dead man, but he was also buried for us and our salvation. In this respect, three things are worth mentioning. First, Christ’s humiliation was intensified by his burial. Is the grave any place for the only-begotten Son of God to lie? Second, his burial also assures us that his death for us is a redemptive reality, not just a gripping fable. Joseph of Arimathea touched Jesus’ dead body with his own hands as he wrapped it up in a linen cloth (Luke 23:53). If Jesus had only fainted, surely this Joseph would have realized it. He would have felt Jesus’ chest still breathing and his heart still beating. However, Joseph knew that Jesus was really dead. That is why he proceeded to bury him. Third, our Mediator has gone to the grave for us and ahead

of us. His temporary presence there has forever changed the grave for those who believe in him. Those who die in Christ know that for them the grave is no longer a final resting place, as it is often called. Instead, Christ has transformed the grave into a *temporary* resting place. In fact, it might even be called a temporary anticipating place. For the bodies of those who die in Christ lie in the grave waiting for that great day when those “who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake” (Dan 12:2). Our Mediator was buried and, through this step of his humiliation, the grave, too, lost its sting (1 Cor 15:55).

OUR MEDIATOR DESCENDS INTO HELL: WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?

In the Apostles’ Creed, the last article concerning Christ’s humiliation is “he descended into hell.” This phrase has raised many questions. When did Christ go to hell? After he was buried but before he arose? Some other time? Why did he go there? And what did he do? Furthermore, where in the Bible do you read about Christ descending into hell? If we need texts about his birth, suffering, or death, we have no problem finding them. However, if we need to point to verses about his descent into hell, we have a far greater challenge. So, if there are so many questions swirling around this article, would it be better to remove it altogether? No, to do that would be a terrible shame, for this article of the Christian faith, confessed by the church for literally centuries, is a precious gospel gem, sparkling and gleaming with a comfort that no well-informed Christian would want to lose.

To begin with, let us consider when Christ descended into hell. A quick glance at the Apostles’ Creed might suggest that it happened sometime after he died but before he arose. However, there are two sayings of our Saviour from the cross that indicate that this is not the case. In the first place, Jesus says to the criminal on the cross beside him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). In other words, Jesus gave this man a firm commitment: later that very day both Jesus and he would be in heaven. Obviously, heaven is the very opposite of hell. Secondly, just before he died, Jesus said, “Father, into your hands

I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Again, the hands of the Father are about as far away from hell as anyone could imagine. So, from Christ’s own mouth we know that his soul went to his Father in heaven after he died, and his body was laid in Joseph of Arimathea’s grave. Therefore, neither his soul nor his body made a journey to the place called hell after his death. In fact, this descent happened before, and especially during, his death.

However, this conclusion leads directly into the next point. Where did the early church find this language of descending into hell? Is it scriptural language? Indeed, it is, but you need to turn to the Old Testament to find it. One example is Genesis 42:38. As a father, Jacob is concerned that if his older sons take young Benjamin to Egypt, something may happen to him, and he may never see his son again. If that should occur, Jacob says, “You would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol.” In Hebrew the word *Sheol* can refer to the grave or the state of being dead. In addition, this language of a descent into Sheol is common in the OT, occurring about 25 times (e.g., 1 Sam 2:6; 1 Kgs 2:6; Ps 55:16; Ezek 32:27). It is also a common experience for us today. Sometimes people die suddenly, perhaps due to a serious injury. However, in most situations, there is a gradual decline of health, which pulls someone down, closer and closer to the grave.

The early church was aware of this expression in the Old Testament about descending into Sheol, and they used it, in a special way, for Christ. Gradually Christ also came closer and closer to the day he died. For him there was a descent toward death, and that downward slope only became steeper and steeper as the hour of his crucifixion drew near. However, since Christ is not merely a man, but our Mediator, the church does not speak about a descent into the grave, but a descent into *hell*. Christ walked down the slope toward his death carrying the full burden of God’s wrath against the sin of the whole human race (LD 15, Q&A 37). This burden became most intense on the cross where, for three dark and long hours, he was utterly forsaken by the Father. At the end, he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46) To be utterly forsaken by God is to experience the “unspeakable

anguish, pain, terror, and agony” of hell itself (LD 16, Q&A 44). As he was dying, Christ certainly descended into the deepest depths of hellish horror. Thus, the church rightly confesses that he descended, not merely into Sheol, but most certainly into hell. This does not mean that Christ’s body or soul temporarily relocated and journeyed to the place called hell. Rather the horror of hell came straight to him and afflicted his body and soul right there on the cross.

There is one remaining issue, and that concerns the placement of this article in the Apostles’ Creed. Why is the descent into hell placed after his burial, if chronologically it happened before he died, especially during the three hours of darkness? In their sections on the work of Christ, both the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds follow a chronological line generally but not rigidly. For instance, the Nicene Creed mentions Christ’s sufferings after his crucifixion, but it is clear that he also suffered before his crucifixion, indeed, his sufferings stretch all the way back to his conception and birth. In a similar way, the descent into hell was most intense on the cross, but his walk of life began its downward slope from the moment of conception onwards. For this reason the Catechism, in its treatment of the descent into hell, speaks of the hellish agony “which he endured throughout all his sufferings but especially on the cross” (LD 16, Q&A 44). For this reason, after the Creed has mentioned all the steps of Christ’s humiliation—from cradle to grave—it takes one more look back at the whole slope and says, as it were, “All of this can be summed up in one phrase: he descended into hell.”

The *he* who descended into hell was our Mediator, who walked down that slope in our place. His unspeakable anguish has brought us an unspeakable comfort. Almost all Christians will experience moments of doubt concerning their eternal destiny. Often it is during stressful times caused by a serious sickness, emotional crisis, or severe spiritual trial. Then the worry may arise in the believer’s mind: “What if, after my life, I am sent to hell, even though I hoped to go to heaven?” Such an anxiety is not only agonizing; it can be spiritually debilitating. This article of the Creed, “he descended into hell,” is the God-given antidote for that anxiety. The believer should hold on to this article with heart and soul say-

ing, “Since Christ went through the agony of hell for me, I firmly believe that, whatever anguish I may have to go through in this life, I will never have to go through the horror of hell after this life.” This comfort is a gospel gem that every Christian should hold on to . . . tightly!

Having now completed our study of Christ’s state of humiliation, it should be clear that as he walked down the road of his humiliation, every step he took provided us with yet more redemptive blessings. Understood properly and confessed sincerely, Christology must always lead to doxology.

Suggested Reading: Philippians 2:1–11

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. The introduction to the genealogy of Christ in Matthew 1:1 highlights the fact that he was born into the line of David’s descendants, as well as Abraham’s descendants. Of what significance for our salvation is it that Christ is “the son of David”? Similarly, of what significance is it that he is “the son of Abraham”?
2. The Athanasian Creed says that the right faith is that we should confess that “our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is equally both God and man” (30). The word *equally* indicates that there should be a balanced emphasis on both his divine and human natures. What happens to our understanding of Christ’s sufferings if we put too much emphasis on his divine nature? Likewise, what happens if we put too much emphasis on his human nature?
3. On the one hand, death remains the “last enemy” until Christ returns (1 Cor 15:26). On the other hand, death has lost its sting (1 Cor 15:54–56) and we have been freed from slavery to the “fear of death” (Heb 2:14–15). Since both of these are true, how do we explain the effect of Christ’s death on our death? For those who are in Christ, is death really still an enemy that attacks? Or has death already been conquered in Christ for them?
4. In 1 Corinthians 2:2 the apostle Paul sums up his approach to preaching with these words: “For I decided to know nothing among

you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Why did the apostle put so much stress on Christ’s crucifixion?

5. Draw a simple diagram that lists all the steps of Christ’s humiliation. Then, at each step, list all the specific blessings that flow to Christians from that particular aspect of our Mediator’s humiliation. Discuss your diagram with others to see if they have listed benefits that you overlooked.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. When people near and dear to us suffer, we want to comfort them. How can we use a deeper understanding of Christ’s suffering to comfort the suffering Christian? Consider each of the different steps of his humiliation (e.g., incarnation, suffering, death, descent into hell), and explore how they might be used to give others consolation. When we comfort fellow believers are we sufficiently Christ-centered, and if not, what practical steps can we take to improve that?
2. Christmas and Good Friday are special days for commemorating the beginning and final steps of our Mediator’s humiliation. These days also involve various family traditions and influences from society (e.g., Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny). What can we do within our homes and churches to make these special days focus, more clearly, on Christ’s humiliation? Or are we already paying too much attention to them and elevating them above the weekly feast day, namely, the Lord’s Day?
3. If death is our last enemy which has already lost its sting (see Question for Understanding #3), how should this be reflected in the practical arrangements for our funerals? What constitutes a “good” eulogy? Is it significant that the body is lowered into the ground (1 Cor 15:42–44)? What about cremation?
4. Even Christians will sometimes wrestle with the fear that, in spite of their desire to serve the Lord, they might end up suffering in hell rather than enjoying heaven. Is this fear commendable because such people are not being presumptuous? Or does it show a lack of faith

in Christ's work on the cross? How would you speak to someone with this kind of fear?

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