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What does the Apostles' Creed mean when it says that Jesus descended into hell?

The Apostles' Creed is used as an integral form of worship in many Christian bodies. One of the more puzzling statements in that creed is: [Jesus] descended into hell.

First of all, we have to look at the creed from a historical perspective. We know that the Apostles' Creed was not written by the apostles, but it's called the Apostles' Creed because it was the early Christian community's attempt to give a summary of apostolic teaching. This, like other creeds in the church's history, was partly a response to distorted teachings that were present in some communities; it was statement of orthodox belief. The earliest reference we can find to that "descent into hell" element of the Creed is around the middle of the third century. That doesn't mean that it wasn't in the original—we don't know when the original was written—but it seems to be a later addition and has caused no small amount of controversy ever since. The reason for it is theological as well as biblical.

We see this problem: Jesus, when he's on the cross in his dying agony, speaks to the thief next to him and assures him that "today you will be with me in paradise." Now that statement from Jesus on the cross would seem to indicate that Jesus was planning to go to paradise, which is not to be confused with hell. So in some sense Jesus goes to paradise. We know that his body goes into the tomb. His soul apparently is in paradise. When does he go to hell? Or does he go to hell?

In **1 Peter 3:19** (<http://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Peter%203.19>), Peter talks about "this Jesus, who by the same spirit by which he is raised from the dead goes and preaches to the lost spirits in prison." That text has been used as the principal proof text to say that Jesus, at some point after his death, generally believed to be between his death and his resurrection, went to hell. Some people say that he went into hell to experience the fullness of the magnitude of suffering—the full penalty for human sin—in order to give complete atonement for sin. That is regarded by some as a necessary element of Christ's passion.

But most churches that believe in an actual descent of Jesus into hell do not see him going to hell for further suffering because Jesus declares on the cross, "It is finished." Rather, he goes to hell to liberate those spirits who, from antiquity, have been held in prison. His task in hell then is one of triumph, liberating Old Testament saints. I personally think that the Bible is less than clear on that point because the lost spirits in prison could very well refer to lost people in this world. Peter doesn't tell us who the lost spirits in prison are or where the prison is. People are making a lot of assumptions when they consider that this is a reference to hell and that Jesus went there between his death and his resurrection.

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