

Series Apostles' Creed

This Message #6 I Believe that Christ Descended Into Hades and On the Third Day Rose Again From the Dead

Scripture

The death and resurrection of Jesus are the most important events in human history. The crucifixion death of Jesus made possible the redemption of sinful humanity and reconciliation between God and mankind. It is unfortunate that most people do not appreciate this fact. Many people in our world have never heard that it happened, and many who have heard do not take the good news seriously.

Some of the people in Jerusalem witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus but, at the time it was happening, the reason for the death of Jesus was hidden from them. The death of Jesus was, in reality, a private matter between the Father and His obedient Son. On the cross Jesus paid the penalty for the accumulated sins of the human race. His death satisfied the justice demanded by the Father and made it possible for sinful people who were under the wrath of God to be redeemed and reconciled to God.

Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, Why have you forsaken me?" during the period when the holy Father had to turn away and break fellowship with His Son because of the sin which had been placed on Jesus. Later, when Jesus said, "It is finished," it meant that the transaction was completed. The price for sin had been paid in full, and the Father was satisfied with the self-sacrifice of His Son. When Jesus understood this, He released His Spirit and died physically. He knew that the justice demanded by the Father had been satisfied and that the Father was prepared to offer the forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation to humanity.

Jesus had attempted on several occasions to explain the reason for His approaching death to His followers, but the Bible explains that "the disciples did not understand any of this; its meaning was hidden from them and they did not know what He was talking about" (*Luke 18:34*).

The followers of Jesus accepted that He was the promised Messiah, but the crucifixion shattered their hopes and left them very confused. As two of the followers said “We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” (*Luke 24:21*). When the battered and scarred body of Jesus was placed in the tomb, it was like the final blow to the expectations of the disciples. Puzzled, confused, and afraid, the apostles secluded themselves behind locked doors, unclear about what to do next.

There was even more perplexity when, early on the third day, Mary Magdalene came running to them with the news that the stone had been moved from the entrance of the tomb and that someone had taken the Lord’s body. Peter and John ran to the tomb to see for themselves, and they did, in fact, discover that the body was missing even though the strips of burial linen were still in place. The Apostle John wrote that he and the other disciples “still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead” (*John 20:9*).

That is the context for the two statements we will think about today. The first statement concerns the curious words, “He descended into hades.” This statement concerns the status of Jesus between His death and His resurrection on the third day.

In order to explain this phrase, “He descended into hades,” I need to give a short history lesson and then a short language lesson. You need to know that this phrase is the most controversial statement in the Creed. It was not part of the original Creed used in the early church fellowships. It was added to the Creed in the Fourth Century, and ever since, both theologians and believers have raised questions about the meaning. There are only a few Biblical passages which are relevant to the statement, and they are difficult to understand and subject to a variety of interpretations. For this reason, the phrase, “He descended into hades,” is omitted by many church groups when they recite the Creed.

We will have to let theologians debate the fine points about their opinions. We can, however, talk about some of the main reasons for the confusion about the word “hades.” Here is some background information. There are three words used in the Greek and Hebrew languages related to the word “hades.” In the Greek language, “hades” simply refers to “the place of departed spirits.” The comparable word in Hebrew is “sheol.” In the Old Testament, “sheol” was the place where people went after death. It was a term synonymous with “the grave” (*see, for example, Psalm 49:14 where the word translated “grave” is the word “sheol”*).

Jews sometimes referred to this place as “Abraham’s Bosom,” (*see the parable in Luke 16:19-31*) and some commentators suggest that the word “paradise” also refers to this same place. Jesus used the word “paradise” when talking to the thief who was crucified with Jesus (*Luke 23:43*).

The Jews thought of “hades” / “sheol” as the place where the Old Testament saints were held until they received resurrection bodies. These saints had been obedient to God; they had been declared righteous; they had died in faith anticipating a future day when they would stand before God. However, there was no basis for the resurrection of their bodies until the death of Jesus Christ. Thus “hades” / “sheol” was a temporary “holding place” for the Old Testament saints until after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Some commentators assume that Jesus descended into this temporary abode, this “place of departed spirits,” and joined these Old Testament saints for the brief time between His death and bodily resurrection. These commentators suggest that Jesus’ experience in “hades” was an important part of His identity with humanity, that His full incarnation into humanity had to also include death and burial, and that His spirit had to go into the unseen world to await resurrection. Just as He bore our nature while He was alive, He had to bear our nature when dead.

In the English language the word “hell” is sometimes used in place of hades. There is a reason for this. When the Creed was originally translated from Greek and Latin into the Anglo-Saxon language, at that time the word “hell” meant “the unseen world, the place of departed spirits.” It had a similar meaning as “hades.” However, as the Anglo-Saxon language evolved into modern English, the meaning of the word “hell” changed. It came to refer to the place of torment for unrepentant sinners; the place associated with the devil. This is the common understanding today.

There is yet another reason for our lack of understanding today. Beginning in the Fourth Century, some theologians began to teach that Jesus Christ descended into the place of the devil and unrepentant sinners. By the Middle Ages an elaborate doctrine had been developed called “the harrowing of hell.” According to this doctrine, Jesus Christ, between his crucifixion and resurrection, went to the regions of darkness in order to proclaim his victory over the devil and the demons. European and Roman Catholic theologians developed this doctrine to where it is today.

The Bible nowhere explicitly says that Jesus descended into this place of the devil and his demons, although there are a few verses in Scripture which can be “stretched” in interpretation to support this view. However, the earliest versions of the Creed did not imply that Jesus descended into the place prepared for the devil. Creeds that continue to use the word “hell,” especially those that imply the place of torment set aside for the devil and his followers, convey an incorrect meaning.

Just what did believers in the early centuries think about when they recited the Creed? Simply that Jesus did really die, and in His death He entered into the human experience of dying as much as any person who had ever died; that His body was placed in the tomb, and that His spirit descended into “hades” exactly the way it happened to other people who died. Jesus Himself had announced what would happen: “Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (*Matthew 12:40*).

Think about the structure of the Creed. Preceding words mentioned His suffering, His crucifixion, His death, His burial. Then we have the next logical description of what happened; He was in the place of the dead. This sequence is driving home the reality of the death of our Lord; He was not spared the consequences of death in any way. The statement, “He descended into hades,” is emphasizing and affirming the finality and totality of the Lord’s identity with humanity, with the fact that all people die and their spirits await the miracle of resurrection.

It really does not matter where Jesus was during the interval between His death and resurrection. If it was important, the Scriptures would have had to be much clearer than they are. The emphasis in the Bible is not on the place where Jesus went, but on the truth that He did not stay in that place. The Apostle Peter emphasized this truth in his sermon on the day of Pentecost. First, Peter said, “God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him” (*Acts 2:24*).

Then Peter quoted some words written by David the Psalmist. According to Peter, David was a prophet who, “seeing what was ahead, spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay” (*Acts 2:31*). Peter then once again stated: “God has raised this Jesus to life, and then added, “we (all the apostles) are all witnesses of the fact” (*Acts 2:32*).

The point is that death, in all its aspects, including the disposition of both body and soul, was only temporary. Remember the reason: “because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.” And so, on the third day, Jesus emerged from the grave with body, soul, and spirit intact.

This is the point where the statements in the Creed turn a corner. The next phrase declares, “On the third day he rose from the dead.” Up to this point, the physical experiences of Jesus as a man were quite ordinary. All humans who have ever lived have anticipated their approaching death, burial, and the grave. But with Jesus there was something new and unanticipated — resurrection from the grave and new life in a special glorified body. Because Jesus was not a mere man, and because He lived on earth as a man without sin, death had no claim on Him. He rose triumphant from the grave.

And a comparison of various passages suggests that the risen Savior also released the Old Testament saints from their abode in “hades” / “sheol” and led them to glory. See, for example, Ephesians 4:8 and the very mysterious verses Matthew 27:50-53. See also Revelation 1:18.

It was several days before the followers of Jesus grasped the significance of His resurrection. At least one of the Apostles had doubts about the reports from his peers that they had been with Jesus, but those doubts disappeared when Jesus confronted Thomas, after which Thomas fell to his knees with the testimony, “My Lord and my God” (*John 20:24-28*). The reality was that Jesus’ resurrection surprised all His followers even though He had prophesied it. Yet when faced with the undeniable evidence that Jesus was really alive, and with their new understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures, the followers of Jesus made the resurrection the core issue in their testimonies. They believed it, preached it, lived it, suffered persecution for it, and even died for it.

The good news of the resurrection became the good news of the Gospel. The Apostle Paul mentioned the resurrection more than thirty times in his letters to the New Testament churches. He explained to the members of the Corinthian Church the importance of the resurrection appearances of Jesus to the gospel message. This is what he wrote: “Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. ... For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time. ... Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also.” Paul concluded the paragraph by writing again: “this is what we preach” (*I Corinthians 15:1-11*).

What were the core elements of Paul’s preaching? Christ died, he was buried, he was raised, and He appeared, He appeared, He appeared, He appeared, He appeared. The emphasis in Paul’s preaching is obvious: Jesus had come back from the grave. Paul and the other apostles were so convinced of the resurrection that they devoted the remainder of their lives to the proclamation of this Good News. Belief in the resurrection was a necessary requirement for salvation.

The redemptive plan of God could not have been accomplished without the resurrection. Paul explained why in I Corinthians 15. I will summarize this passage with four brief statements. First, If Christ has not been raised, then there is no hope of anyone else being raised either. Death would be the end of the line.

Second, If Christ has not been raised, then faith in God is futile; people would have no escape from their sins, and no assurance of salvation because there would be no indwelling of God’s Spirit in individual lives.

Third, If Christ has not been raised, then there has been a lot of false witnesses during the past two thousand years because many people have testified that God raised Christ from the dead.

Fourth, If there is no resurrection then lots of believers were foolish and stupid to carry out their evangelistic efforts. As Paul asked, “why do we endanger ourselves every hour? If I fought wild beasts ... for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, then ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die’” (*I Corinthians 15:29-32*). If the resurrection had not occurred, then the true meaning of human existence would be defined by death and annihilation, and people might as well live for the moment.

All of those early followers endured great persecutions because they had seen the risen Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was the cornerstone of their Christian faith, and it has continued to be so for believers down through the centuries. The power of God was revealed in the resurrection, the reality of God’s life was manifested in the lives of believers through the Holy Spirit, and believers have hope beyond the physical pains, loneliness, and death of this age. The resurrection of Jesus Christ took the fear out of death.

The resurrection is true. That is why so many lives were changed in the early church. It is also why so many sin-damaged lives today are being changed. Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, people of faith can live new and transformed lives. The resurrection is the basis for purpose and meaning in this life.