

I Believe

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
(Genesis 1:1 ESV)*

*And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.
(Hebrews 11:6 ESV)*

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God,
that you may know that you have eternal life.
(1 John 5:13 ESV)*

He Descended Into Hell

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Various Texts

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Introduction:

Good morning Redeemer! Today we come to the line in the Apostle's Creed that is going to force us to consider a doctrine that receives very little attention in modern Evangelicalism. Following our confession that Jesus was crucified, dead and buried, we confess:

He descended into hell

I suspect that I would have a very difficult time finding anyone in this room willing and able to explain what this line means. Just to be clear: That's a problem. A confession that we don't understand is not only unhelpful – it is also dangerous.

For example, people who didn't understand this line used it as a defence for some pretty dangerous heresies – heresies like purgatory and universalism. You'd think that such abuses would encourage us to pick up this line and explain it clearly, yet some recent theologians – theologians that I respect and admire – have suggested that it would be better simply to remove it from the creed in its entirety.

I respect those men, but I wholeheartedly disagree. The misuse of a doctrine should not lead to the abandonment of a doctrine. Imagine if we threw away every doctrine that was misused and

abused! We'd have to disregard the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of the natures of Christ, the doctrine of salvation and EVERY OTHER DOCTRINE that we know and treasure today! But we're not! Because those doctrines are Biblical and valuable. Why then would we let this doctrine go?

Our task as followers of Christ is to seek to understand the whole counsel of God's Word. Therefore, if this doctrine is found in God's Word, then we must resolve to push past the silliness and to see and savour that which is there.

I started this sermon with something of a warning, because I want you to understand some of the concern that our brothers and sisters feel about this line of the Creed. However, having noted their concern, let me declare in case you haven't picked it up already that I am solidly in the camp of those who believe this line needs to stay. And, if it's going to stay, then it needs to be understood.

As 21st century believers living in the age of science and reason, this doctrine challenges us and offends our rationality. To which I say: "Good!" My modern, sceptical, arrogant disposition needs to be challenged! Do you want to know what the ancient theologians had to say about this doctrine? Did Augustine, for example, see this line as unhelpful or unclear? He wrote:

Who, therefore, **except an infidel**, will deny that Christ was in hell?¹

Let's count Augustine as a vote for the "keep it in" column. What about Martin Luther? He wrote:

We believe simply that the entire person, God and human being, descended to Hell after his burial, conquered the devil, destroyed the power of Hell, and took from the devil all his power.²

Make that two votes. The truth is, I could go on and on because, as it turns out, the early church had NO PROBLEM embracing and treasuring this line in the Creed. I agree wholeheartedly with Matthew Emerson who writes:

¹ Augustine as quoted by Matthew Y. Emerson, *He Descended To The Dead - An Evangelical Theology Of Holy Saturday*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 73.

² Martin Luther as quoted by Matthew Y. Emerson, *He Descended To The Dead - An Evangelical Theology Of Holy Saturday*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 90.

If the creeds have stood the test of time, and if, in standing that test, their phrases have been proven, generation upon generation, to be an accurate summary of biblical content, those phrases that give us most trouble today should be seen not as hurdles to be jumped or chaff to be separated from the wheat but as challenges to our (post)modern imaginations... At minimum, it says to the interpreter who questions a creedal phrase, "search the Scriptures again, and so with the communion of the saints."³

Search the Scriptures again with the communion of the saints. By God's grace, we're going to do just that this morning.

Now, this doctrine is similar to the doctrine of the Trinity in that, while it can be seen in a number of verses, those verses really need to be considered together. They're like pieces of a puzzle that make the most sense when they are viewed as a collective whole. So, let's begin this morning by putting the pieces together.

Putting the Pieces Together

To that end, we're going to ask some questions now – questions that many of you have never asked before – and we're going to answer them from the Word of God. Here's our first question:

1. What happened to Old Testament believers after they died?

That's a multi-layered question, isn't it?

For starters, we need to clarify what we mean when we refer to Old Testament saints as "believers." On this side of the cross, a believer is someone who has placed their trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. But did Abraham place his trust in Jesus? He hadn't even heard of Jesus! The Apostle Paul is helpful here. He explains in Romans 4:3:

For what does the Scripture say? "**Abraham believed God**, and it was counted to him as righteousness." (Romans 4:3 ESV)

Abraham was a "believer!" Just like us, he and every other Old Testament believer was saved by faith! Our faith looks *back* to Jesus' completed work on the cross. Their faith looked *forward* to

³ Matthew Y. Emerson, *He Descended To The Dead - An Evangelical Theology Of Holy Saturday*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 11.

the fulfilment of God's promises. Did they know, as they sacrificed the lamb without blemish that the sacrifice pointed forward to Christ? No. But did they make that sacrifice trusting in faith that God had and would continue to make a way for them to live in fellowship with Him? Absolutely! They were "believers!"

So, what happened to these believers when they died?

First of all, their bodies were buried. Like us, the Old Testament believers have not yet experienced the resurrection of their bodies, so their bodies remain in the ground today. We're going to talk more about that in the coming weeks.

But where did their souls go? Are they sleeping? Will they simply wake up on the day of the final judgement? The clearest answer to this question actually comes from what you might consider an unclear source. In Luke 16, Jesus told this parable:

¹⁹ "There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. ²⁴ And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' ²⁵ But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' (Luke 16:19-26 ESV)

Now, if you are anything like me, you're thinking, "Wait, you're using a PARABLE to explain this doctrine?! Parables are made up stories! And this parable is meant to teach us about how we ought to treat the poor. It's not about cosmology!" That was my first response too. But as Pastor Paul and I batted this back and forth a few months ago, he made a simple but profound observation that has shifted my perspective.

Think about this: In every single one of Jesus' parables, he draws from the common understanding of the crowd. He talks about losing a coin in the living room, or throwing seed on rocky soil, or

lending a cup of flour to the neighbor. The details of the parable are always FAMILIAR and IDENTIFIABLE to his listeners. He draws on their common knowledge to illustrate his points.

Therefore, it is unlikely that Jesus was introducing novel ideas in this parable about the experience of the dead. And sure enough, as we read the Old Testament and particularly as we read writings from second temple Judaism, we see that the Jews understood that all of the dead descended spiritually to the place of the dead, otherwise known as Hades. As Albert Mohler notes:

The Hebrew word from the Old Testament is *sheol*, and the Greek word from the New Testament is *hades*. In both cases this refers to the temporary realm of the dead who are awaiting final judgment.”⁴

The Jews understood Hades to be made up of three “tiers” or “compartments.” The righteous dead resided in a place called “paradise” or “Abraham’s side,” the unrighteous dead went to a separate compartment – a place of torment – and then there was a third compartment where fallen angels awaited judgement. All three of these compartments were in mind when Jews thought about “Sheol.”

That leads to our second question:

2. Where did Jesus go when he died?

When we say, “he descended to hell” we are not suggesting that Jesus went to the place of torment. No one in the early church believed that! We are using the term “hell” to describe the place of the dead – the place where the souls of both the righteous and the unrighteous dead – lay waiting for the final judgement. Jesus did not experience any more suffering or separation in his descent. His offering on our behalf was completed on the cross when he declared:

“It is finished” (John 19:30b ESV)

⁴ R. Albert Mohler, *The Apostles’ Creed: Discovering Authentic Christianity In An Age Of Counterfeits*, (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2019), 89.

It is finished. From that moment on, Jesus' suffering was complete. The descent was not one more rung of humiliation – it was the first stop on his victory tour! We know that Jesus did not descend into the place of torment because he looked to the repentant sinner who died on the cross next to him and said:

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43b ESV)

Therefore, when Jesus died on the cross, his soul immediately descended to the place of the righteous dead – the place elsewhere referred to as “paradise” or as “Abraham’s bosom.” Perhaps you are tempted to object here and say, “Wait! I think ‘paradise’ here simply refers to heaven! Who says that Jesus descended to Hades?”

Good question! Actually, the Apostle Peter tells us that Jesus descended to Hades, and he makes his argument from Psalm 16. Interestingly enough, he makes this argument in the very first Christian sermon ever preached! Which suggests to me that the Apostles might have a thing or two to say about whether or not we should let this doctrine go. In Acts 2, beginning in verse 27, we read:

For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,

or let your Holy One see corruption.

²⁸ You have made known to me the paths of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’

²⁹ “Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰ Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, ³¹ **he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.** (Acts 2:27-31 ESV)

So, did Jesus descend to Hades? Is this a Biblical doctrine? Absolutely! Jesus was crucified. His body was placed in a tomb and his soul descended to Hades. But his soul was not abandoned there, and his flesh did not see corruption. Three days later, his soul ascended from Hades and his body walked out of the tomb. That’s what the Bible says.

But why? That’s our next question this morning:

3. What did Jesus accomplish in his descent?

The clearest answer to this question is found in Revelation 1. The Apostle John sees a vision of Jesus and he writes:

¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, ¹⁸ and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, **and I have the keys of Death and Hades.** (Revelation 1:17-18 ESV)

As we have discussed week after week throughout this series, Jesus’ death had nothing to do with his own sin. He had no sin! And because he had no sin, death had no true claim on him. Therefore, when he descended to the place of the dead, he was the only man who had authority to rip the key out of death’s firm grip. Ben Myers notes:

Because he shares our nature he is able to fall with us into death; because he is the Son of God he is able to fill death with his presence **so that the grave becomes a source of life.**⁵

Isn’t that amazing? Just imagine for a moment all of those Old Testament believers who had died and who were waiting in Sheol. They weren’t suffering in torment like those in the lower tier, but they weren’t yet where they longed to be. The author to the Hebrews tells us:

And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better for us, **that apart from us they should not be made perfect.** (Hebrews 11:39–40 ESV)

Just like us, they were still separated from the presence of God by their sin. They had made the sacrifices. They had trusted in God’s promises. They believed that He would make a way for them to finally come home. But they had not yet been made perfect.

What a sight it must have been when the Son of God entered into the place of the dead! Jesus – the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world including those of the Old Testament saints – burst through the door as the victorious Lion of Judah! The soul of the Godman overwhelmed hell with his presence and snatched away the keys from Death and Hades. For three days, he

⁵ Ben Myers, *The Apostle's Creed - A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 82.

proclaimed his victory. The Apostle Peter seems to give us a glimpse into this mysterious scene.

In 1 Peter 3 he writes:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made **alive in the spirit**,¹⁹ **in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison**,²⁰ because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah (1 Peter 3:18-20a ESV)

Those who scoffed and mocked and rejected and disbelieved and even the fallen angels – ALL witnessed the glorious victory of Christ that day! The lamb who was slain descended to the dead, but he did not arrive in a state of defeat. His victory tour had begun! He declared his rule and reign to those under the earth, and then he unlocked death's door and released the righteous dead. "Now where do you see that, pastor?" In Ephesians 4:8-9, the Apostle Paul points back to Psalm 68 and explains:

"When he ascended on high **he led a host of captives**, and he gave gifts to men."

⁹(In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that **he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth?** (Ephesians 4:8-9 ESV)

He descended. He proclaimed his victory. He took the keys. He released his people. He led a host of captives to dwell with him around his heavenly throne where they still reside as they await the final judgement and the resurrection of the body. The souls of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are worshiping around the throne with the souls of every dead follower of Christ. Thus, the author to the Hebrews could write:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us (Hebrews 12:1 ESV)

I know that this doctrine sounds *strange* to our modern ears, but we need to piece this puzzle back together because, rightly understood it is a source of clarity, comfort and courage.

Clarity, Comfort and Courage

With the time left, I want to show you some of the reasons why this line in the Creed has been passed on through the ages, and why we should resist the calls to throw it by the wayside. First of all, this confession leads us to:

1. Clarity

I imagine a few of you are laughing on the inside. Perhaps clarity is not the adjective that you would use to describe this sermon.

But rightly understood, this doctrine compels us to think clearly. The questions that we have asked and answered this morning are important questions! And yet, I suspect that those questions have never once crossed some of your minds. Which means, you have read passages like Acts 2:27-31, Ephesians 4:8-9, Luke 16:19-31, Matthew 12:40, Revelation 1:18, Psalm 68, and Psalm 16 just to name a few and yet you have failed to see something that the early church saw and delighted in! There's a whole theological treasure here that our generation is missing out on. I read this quote to you earlier, but I want to read it to you once more because it's so good we need to hear it twice:

If the creeds have stood the test of time, and if, in standing that test, their phrases have been proven, generation upon generation, to be an accurate summary of biblical content, those phrases that give us most trouble today should be seen not as hurdles to be jumped or chaff to be separated from the wheat but as challenges to our (post)modern imaginations... At minimum, it says to the interpreter who questions a creedal phrase, "**search the Scriptures again, and so with the communion of the saints.**"⁶

I love that. I feel rebuked by that. I am a 21st century man who is more influenced by the secular humanism of my culture than I can even begin to understand. It is good for me to study my Bible alongside Martin Luther who once threw an ink pot across his room because he sensed that the Devil was there with him. It's good for me to study the Bible with the voices of Augustine and Calvin and Athanasius and Charles Spurgeon whispering in my ear: "Are you so blinded by your culture? Look! What does the text say?"

I won't belabor this point, but I suspect that if the church reclaimed this doctrine, we would hear better sermons at the funerals of our loved ones. The number of times I've heard someone stand

⁶ Matthew Y. Emerson, *He Descended To The Dead - An Evangelical Theology Of Holy Saturday*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 11.

up and say, “He’s up there doing cartwheels right now!” is shocking to me. It’s not heresy, but it’s not correct. And if it’s not correct, then it’s not helpful. Grieving people need more than our best guess. They need clarity.

If your deceased loved one is a Christian, they are currently living as a spirit around the throne of Christ. The Apostle Paul says:

Yes, we are of good courage, and **we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.** (2 Corinthians 5:8 ESV)

They’re not missing their body right now! They are with the Lord and with the saints of old. They are worshiping and adoring Him! But they are not oblivious to the events that are unfolding on earth. Hebrews 12 reminds us that those who have passed on before us are like a great cloud of witnesses. Revelation 6 tells us about the saints asking: “How long?” They, like us, are waiting for the final judgement when God will finally set all things as they should be. After the judgement, we will be reconstituted in our resurrected bodies. The unrighteous will be thrown into the Lake of Fire. The redeemed will dwell forever in the new heavens and the new earth.

Those truths used to be common knowledge. We’ve lost some clarity in this generation, and we need to reclaim it. Partly because clarity brings comfort.

2. Comfort

This is a comforting truth, and we need comfort. As we studied the book of Thessalonians just last year, we were reminded that even the earliest believers struggled with fear and disbelief whenever their loved ones died. Seeing death is a tremendous test of faith. It forces us to ask, “Do I really believe this? Do I really believe that Christ has stolen the keys from Death and Hades? Because, right now, all of my senses are telling me that death has won.” We’re not the first ones to ask that question. In fact, we ought to hear the saints of old wrestling with that question as we recite this line in the creed. Ben Myers notes:

Even today the Apostle’s Creed makes the most sense when you imagine the words echoing among the bones of the catacombs. The creed is marked everywhere by an unflinching acceptance of the facts of human mortality, coupled with a straightforward

confidence in the ultimate triumph of life - a triumph that has already happened once and for all in the person of Jesus.⁷

Christianity doesn't deny any aspect of the human experience. Jesus didn't promise a life free from suffering. No, he himself suffered just like we do. He was crucified. He died. His body was placed in a dark tomb. His soul descended to the place of the dead. One commentator notes:

Death, both the moment of dying and the state of being dead, is a universal human experience, and Christ experiences it with us and for us.⁸

But there, in that place of the dead – that place that I can't see with my own eyes – that place that is beyond my ability to comprehend – there, he proclaimed VICTORY! He stole the keys from Death and Hades! He opened the prison doors, and he led his people home! I know that this is true because his word tells me so. He proved his authority by walking out of that grave, and he told me that eventually, my loved one would walk out of that grave too. This doctrine is comfort! And finally, this doctrine fills us with courage.

3. Courage

Our Lord has defeated death! And, through him, so too have we! Comfortable, secure, North American Christians, do you love Jesus more than you love life itself? Do you trust his promise to the extent that you would sooner lose your life than renounce your faith?

In many parts of the world today, Christians are literally dying for Jesus. It has been this way since the inception of the church. We think it's normal that we live in a culture where we are free to practice our faith and to worship our God without persecution but, historically and globally, we are a rare exception. The call to follow Jesus is a call to "take up your cross." It's a call to "lose your life." And you WON'T do that unless you believe this doctrine in your BONES.

Historically, the seasons of the most explosive growth in the church have come on the heels of persecution. It's one thing to share the gospel with your friend as you each sip on a cold Frappuccino. It's another thing entirely to sing songs of praise as you are covered in pitch and

⁷ Ben Myers, *The Apostle's Creed - A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 83.

⁸ Matthew Y. Emerson, *He Descended To The Dead - An Evangelical Theology Of Holy Saturday*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 57.

burned to death in the public square. In the fourth century, reflecting on the numerous martyrs who had willingly laid down their lives for the gospel, Athanasius observed:

If you see children playing with a lion, don't you know that the lion must be either dead or completely powerless? In the same way... when you see Christ's believers playing with death and despising it, there can be no doubt that death has been destroyed by Christ and that its corruption has been dissolved and brought to an end.⁹

Christian, do you believe?

Do you believe that Jesus has stolen the keys of Death and Hades? Do you believe that he has set the captives free? Do you believe that there is nothing left to fear in death? Would you bet your life on it? If an officer marched into this room and, with a gun to your head, asked you to choose between worshipping Jesus or keeping your life, could you look him in the eye and say, "I choose Jesus." Jesus said:

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 16:24-25 ESV)

He demands your life because he is the only one who has the authority to save it! He declared his authority in Hades, he proved it on earth in his resurrection, and he now exercises it at the right hand of the Father in heaven.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, **in heaven and on earth and under the earth,** ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11 ESV)

From the heavens, to the earth, to the place of the dead – Jesus reigns! Jesus has authority! Jesus will be praised! And it is the people who believe this doctrine that CHANGE THE WORLD! If that's you, then stand with me now as we proclaim the Creed together.

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth;

⁹ Ben Myers, *The Apostle's Creed - A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 83-84.

and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified dead and buried;
He descended into hell;
the third day He rose again from the dead;
He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost;
the holy catholic church;
the communion of saints;
the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the body:
and the life everlasting. Amen.