

The Apostles Creed: Week 4

“... (Jesus) suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; he descended to the dead.”

Today's snippet of the creed contains some of the most important realities that undergird our faith in the Gospel of Christ as well as a seemingly curious, but easily explained, statement within the creed.

1. The centrality of the work of Christ
 - a. If we wanted to summarize the very heartbeat of the Christian faith, it would almost certainly be that which Paul said was of “first importance”, namely “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...”
 - b. These Gospel truths formulate the very backbone of the creed's assertions today
 - c. Let's break it down into its various parts
2. First, we see that Christ suffered under Pilate
 - a. Some might wonder why this was included in the creed, and I believe there are at least two realities at play that make this statement integral to the Christian confession
 - b. First, we read that Christ suffered
 - i. Part of Jesus' substitutionary death was prophesied not just as dying in our place but absorbing the wrath of God that was due us leading up to His death
 - ii. Isaiah 53 is a chapter rich with Messianic significance
 1. In that text (specifically verses 4-6) the Bible records for us a prophecy of the coming Messiah stating that He would “bear our griefs” which would render Him “stricken and smitten by God”
 - iii. The point is that Jesus' death would be for the purpose of taking upon Himself all of the grief and consequence due us in our sin
 - iv. Jesus' death was not simply death, it was an agonizing, slow death that entailed the drinking of the entirety of the cup of God's right wrath against our sin
 1. This is what caused Him such consternation in Gethsemane
 2. Many faithful Christians have died with their heads held high, in fact numerous stories exist in Scripture (see Stephen) and in Christian history (like in Foxe's book of martyrs) record gloriously thrilling and radiant deaths of God's faithful, yet Jesus was sorrowful unto death and almost overwhelmed with angst
 3. Is this because mankind dies better than Christ? May it never be! It is because Jesus' death was more than a physical death, it was a substitutionary death
 4. While it did include joy on the other side, the pathway to joy was riddled with overwhelming and sorrowful pain
 - c. Second, this clause is important because it roots our faith in history

- i. Jesus really did live, He really did die and, to help prove the point, the Bible tells us exactly when He lived and died, in part, by alluding to the governing officials that lived and presided over His sham trial
 - ii. We are not confessors of fairytales, we confess faith in the historic God-man, Jesus Christ
- 3. Second, we see the fact of Jesus' death
 - a. The biblical teaching is that sin requires death
 - b. In the Old Testament, this was pictured by the killing of animals to demonstrate, visibly, the ramifications of sins
 - c. However, none of these sacrifices were sufficient, if we would be forgiven of our sins, the blood of something more precious than bulls and goats would need to be spilled
 - d. That precious someone is a Person, He is God in the flesh and He really did die
 - e. The beauty of the Gospel is that Christ took my place
 - i. This means, amongst other things, that He must take my place in death if He is going to pay, or atone, for my sins
 - ii. The Apostles Creed says that He really did die, and we agree with a hearty "Amen"
 - iii. The wording here is significant... Christ died, how do we know He died? Because He was buried!
 - iv. There was no "swoon" that took place where Jesus just seemed dead. He went all the way, and He did so in order to be our propitiation for sin
- 4. Third, we see the result of Christ's death
 - a. Some translations of the creed say that Jesus descended into "hell"
 - b. This is an unfortunate rendering of a far more generic Greek word
 - c. The Word "hades" is the term used in the Scripture to refer to the realm of the dead
 - d. Some who died go to the place of eternal torment called hell but others are in paradise (see the thief on the cross)
 - e. The point of the creed is not that Jesus went to hell even though some have invented some creative and, frankly, horrific doctrines that teach as such
 - i. Some claim that Jesus owed a further debt (perhaps even to Satan himself) to atone for our sins after death
 - ii. Others claim that He went to hades to experience the furthest penalties of death
 - iii. However, on the cross, Jesus clearly stated "it is finished"
 - 1. What was finished? Upon His death (which happened immediately after His statement), Jesus was done atoning for our sins
 - iv. So, what does the statement mean?
 - 1. It means that Jesus really, physically died
 - 2. He went all the way, the wages of sin is death and Jesus physically died in His humanity
 - f. We affirm that Jesus rose from the grave, this means that His body must be laid in the grave and, therefore, He must have descended into the realm of the dead from which He gloriously returned!