

Valley View Chapel
October 10, 2010
Essentials, Part 4
“Jesus: His Death”

“I believe in....Jesus Christ...Who...suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into hell....”

Introduction

“I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary; Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell....”

Do you find it strange that *The Apostles’ Creed* transitions immediately from the birth of Christ to his death? It makes no mention of anything to do with his life. There is no reference to the *Sermon on the Mount*, the Transfiguration, or his miracles of healing. There is nothing said about turning the water into wine, calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee, or raising Lazarus from the dead.

Perhaps this is because the authors of *The Apostles’ Creed* understood that the ultimate *reason* for his life was to *die* on the cross for the sins of the world.

Why Pontius Pilate?

Here’s the summary statement of the Christian faith. I just recalled for you some really important things that were omitted from *The Apostles’ Creed*. But here is Pontius Pilate, a bit player in the sacred drama, a relatively low level Roman politician with little more than a cameo appearance in the gospel accounts. Yet he gets top billing. Peter, James John, and Paul are never mentioned in *The Apostles’ Creed*. Yet this two-bit shyster somehow got his name in lights on the marquee. Have you ever wondered why?

I believe there is only one reason why Pontius Pilate’s name is mentioned in *The Apostles’ Creed* and that is to place the events surrounding the death of Christ right in the mainstream of recorded history.

It wasn't that long ago when many scholars questioned the actual existence of a Roman Governor with the name Pontius Pilate. In June 1961 Italian archaeologists led by Dr. Antonio Frova were excavating an ancient Roman amphitheatre near Caesarea and uncovered an interesting limestone block. On the face is a monumental inscription which is part of a larger dedication to Tiberius Caesar which clearly says that it was from "Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea." This is the only known occurrence of the name Pontius Pilate in any ancient inscription. Archaeologists date the inscription between 26 – 37 AD. We can trust the reporting accuracy of the biblical authors.

Biblical Christianity is about people who really lived and situations that actually happened. In his book *Know Why You Believe*, Paul Little stated: “Christianity is rooted in history....If the Bible’s historical references are not true, grave questions may be raised about the reliability of other parts of the message based on historical events.”

Suffered under Pontius Pilate

Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate in two ways.

First, he suffered *gross injustice*. Three times in Luke 23 Pilate announced that he had found nothing in Jesus worthy of arrest much less conviction. Yet he refused to release Jesus, a perfectly innocent man.

Second, he suffered *great brutality*. Matthew 27:26 described this brutality in such brief and stark language that its horror is easily overlooked: “**Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged....**”

Flogging was a Roman practice that caused massive blood loss and often resulted in death. The victim was tied to a pillar and then his bare back was lashed with three-pronged leather whip in which were embedded sharp pieces of metal. More often than not, the man thus afflicted would go into shock, pass out, or die.

Pilate, who had said earlier “I find no basis for a charge against this man,” had Jesus whipped to within an inch of his life - gross injustice and great brutality.

Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate at an exact time and in a specific place. The testimony of Scripture is trustworthy.

Was Crucified, Dead, and Buried

In his book, *What Was God Doing on the Cross?* Alistair McGrath stated that crucifixion was “legalized sadism.” He went on to say: “It is probably one of the most depraved forms of execution ever devised. It is nothing other than death by slow torture.”

So inhuman was the practice of crucifixion that Rome’s first Christian emperor, Constantine, banned its continued practice. From the early 4th century on, no one would ever again be condemned to die on a cross.

The Jews of Jesus’ day could not accept a Messiah one who died on a cross. Their judgment was based on Deuteronomy 21:23 which declared that “**anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse.**” The Jews failed to understand that Jesus was their substitute who was taking the curse of their disobedience.

But that had been the plan of God all along. The Son of God would become a curse for

us. This *substitutionary* aspect of Christ's death is often mentioned in the New Testament.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **“Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.”** I Corinthians 15:3 (NIV)

To the Galatians, Paul explained the meaning of Deuteronomy 21:23, **“Christ redeemed us from the curse of law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’”** Galatians 3:13 (NIV)

Peter underscored this wonderful truth of substitution to the readers of his first letter: **“For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”** I Peter 3:18 (NIV)

It's no coincidence that the English word “crucial” comes from the Latin word for cross - *crux*. We even use that Latin word in contemporary conversation. The “crux of the matter” is the most important point.

There is a reason why the manger, which reminds us of his birth, is not the symbol of Christianity. There is a reason why a lighted candle, which reminds us of the truth that is in Christ, is not the symbol of Christianity. There is a reason why the Easter lily, which reminds us of his resurrection, is not the symbol of Christianity. There is a reason why the cross is “the crux of the matter.” It's because Jesus came to earth to die on the cross for the sins of the whole world – for your sins and mine.

Jesus articulated his mission statement in Luke 19:10 - **“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”** (NIV)

Moreover he declared in Matthew 20:28 - **“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”** (NIV)

Both Luke 19:10 and Matthew 20:28 were fulfilled at the cross.

Descended into Hell

The phrase “descended into hell” is the most controversial and misunderstood statement in *The Apostles' Creed*. Some Christian traditions have even eliminated it from *The Apostles' Creed* altogether. Nevertheless, *rightly understood and interpreted*, it communicates an important aspect of the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

The word “hell” as it is used in *The Apostles' Creed* has two equivalents in the Bible. The Hebrew word is *sheol* and the Greek word is *hades*. Prior to the cross of Christ, *sheol* or *hades* was the place where all people - believers in the God of the Bible and unbelievers alike - went at death.

The most vivid Scriptural description of *this place* is found in Luke 16:19-26. Let's look briefly at this critical passage.

19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.

20 At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores

21 and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

22 "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried.

23 In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.

24 So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

25 "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.

26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.' (NIV)

Luke 16:19-26 described *one location with two compartments or sections*.

The rich man, Lazarus, and Abraham are obviously in the same general location. Lazarus and Abraham are enjoying the good things of God on one side of hades and the rich man is in torment on the other side. They not only can see each other, they're able to communicate.

When Jesus said to the dying thief, "**Today you will be with me in paradise,**" he was talking about hades.

Two statements in Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost tell us that Jesus went to hades when he died.

The NIV rendition of Acts 2:27 which is a messianic prophecy recorded in Psalm 16:10 says, "**you will not abandon me to the grave....**" However the NASB translated that statement more literally: "**Thou wilt not abandon my soul to *hades*....**"

Four verses later, in Acts 2:31, Peter interpreted Psalm 16:10 in the light of Christ's resurrection. The NIV says: "**Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave....**" Once again, the NASB translates the verse more literally: "**He looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that He was neither abandoned to *Hades*....**"

The Greek word used by the NIV translators - "grave" - is *hades*.

But *why* did Jesus have to go to *hades* between his death and resurrection?

The popular author and TV speaker Joyce Meyer said that Jesus didn't pay for our sins on the cross. Jesus paid for our sins when he suffered the torment of hell between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

In a sermon entitled "What Happened from the Cross to the Throne?" she stated: "[When] Jesus said, 'It is finished'...He meant the Old Covenant. The job He had to do was just getting started. He really did the job the three days and nights *that He was in hell*. That's where the job was done. He was pronounced guilty on the cross but He paid the price in hell."

I know that Joyce Meyer is popular with some of you. You watch her on TV and read her books. She's perky. She tells it like it is. She's funny. And she has an incredible wardrobe. And she actually makes sense most of the time. But she's off her rocker on this one. *Jesus didn't pay for our sins in hell*. He all the punishment he was ever going to suffer on the cross.

Jesus' last word before he gave up his spirit was *tetelestai*, the Greek word translated "It is finished". *Tetelestai* was a commercial word meaning "The debt is paid in full." It was written on sales invoices in the ancient world.

A careful reading of the New Testament text clearly indicates that Jesus didn't go to "hell." He went to *hades*. There's a big difference.

It's left to the Apostle Paul, however, in Ephesians 4:8-9 to tell us precisely *why* Jesus "descended into *hades*: **"This is why it says: 'When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men. (What does 'he ascended' mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?)"** (NIV)

Jesus went to *hades* to take the Old Testament saints to heaven! He descended to *hades* in order to bring those, who lived prior to the cross but whose hope was in the Word made flesh, to their eternal home. The faithful who had looked forward to the Messiah's coming followed their conquering king all the way to glory.

Both compartments of *hades* are *temporary* residences. Think of them as "waiting rooms."

Old Testament believers left their "waiting room of blessedness and joy" when Jesus descended into *hades* to take them to.

Unbelievers are *still* in *their* "waiting room of punishment" until the end of the age. Then, according to Revelation 20:11-15, they will appear at The Great White Throne Judgment to be sentenced to their permanent place of torment, which is eternal hell

otherwise known as *Gehenna*, the word that Jesus used 11 times in the gospels to describe the final destination of punishment for unbelievers.

Conclusion

Everyone today who trusts in Christ and in the finished work of his cross goes *immediately* to heaven - not *hades* or *paradise* - at the moment of death. Paul affirmed this truth when he told the Philippians: **“I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.”** Philippians 1:23 (NIV)

If you have not yet received Christ as your Savior and Lord, my hope is that is that you will invite him into your life today and enter into the joy of forgiveness and eternal life. You can receive Christ by praying this prayer sincerely by faith.

“Dear God, I know that my sin has separated me from You. Thank You that Jesus Christ died in my place and rose again to be my Savior. I turn from my sin and trust Jesus to forgive me. Come into my life as my Savior and Lord. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

