

Foundations 5: I Believe in Jesus Christ, ...He Descended to the Dead

February 13, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

1 Peter 3:18-20a

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. ¹⁹ After being made alive,¹⁹ he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits— ²⁰ to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.

We are continuing our series on the twelve statements of the Apostles' Creed, which has formed in summary for almost 2000 years the foundation of why we Christians believe what we believe. Each statement is based on Scripture. This week we will focus on the statement, **I believe in Jesus Christ, ...He descended to the dead.**

This is arguably the most controversial statement in all the Apostles' Creed. It is so controversial that it was left out of the Traditional Version of the Apostles' Creed.

For most of my life I believed that when Jesus died and was buried in the tomb, that his body lay in a state of rest – resting in peace, one could say—until the third day, when Jesus rose again from the dead. Not according to the Ecumenical Version of the Apostles' Creed. Between the time that Jesus died and the time he was risen from the dead on the third day, Jesus was busy. He descended to the dead. According to 1 Peter 3, *“he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits.”* What exactly does that mean?

Now, before I get to that, we need to take a look at another Scripture. The day Jesus died he was hanging on the cross between two criminals. One criminal mocked Jesus and the other criminal defended Jesus, saying, “We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then the criminal said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:41-43)

Okay, I want you to do the math with me. Jesus died on Friday, and it wasn't until the third day he rose from the dead. For forty days Jesus roamed the earth, appearing to the disciples (Acts 1:3), and only then did he ascend into heaven (Acts 1:9-11). So, what did Jesus mean by “today,” as in *“today you will be with me in paradise?* According to

Jesus, the very day he died he would be in paradise and the one criminal was assured he would be there with Jesus. That means Jesus went to a place called "paradise" three days before he rose from the dead. Jesus didn't tell the criminal, "Today I will be with you in heaven," because Jesus didn't go to heaven until another forty-three days. That means that the place Jesus referred to as "paradise" is a different place than what we refer to as "heaven." Are you still with me?

We have to ask, "What then is this 'paradise' Jesus was referring to? Was it the same or something different than what the Apostles' Creed refers to as the descent to the dead, which 1 Peter refers to as where the imprisoned spirits are? It becomes even more complicated to try to explain because some have translated this phrase of the Apostles' Creed as "he descended into hell," when it would be more accurately referred to as "he descended to the dead."

The Jews believe in a place called "Sheol." Sheol or paradise is the place the dead descend to before they ascend to heaven. This intermediate place is not what the Roman Catholics have referred to as "purgatory," as if we could do something here on earth to purge the sins of those who have died. Only Jesus has the power to purge sins.

Sheol is a very general term and is the designation both for the place of torment as well as for paradise. Jesus descended into Sheol, or the place of the dead. ...Sheol contained both the righteous and the wicked. There in the place of the dead, Jesus preached the gospel. ...The [Scripture 1 Peter 3:18-20] text makes specific reference to those dead who lived prior to the flood, but the church has generally understood this as indicating how Jesus preached to people all throughout time, not just those who had recently died. It is a way of saying "even the ancient people" heard this proclamation.¹

Jesus told a parable about a place after death that contained both the righteous and the wicked, the one commonly referred to as the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke chapter 16. Lazarus, who was a righteous man, and the rich man, who was a wicked man, can see each other in the place of the dead (referred to in the parable as Hades (16:23), literally, "the place of the dead"). There is a great chasm that separates them but the rich man can see Lazarus resting in the bosom of Abraham. The rich man appeals to Abraham to send Lazarus back to his brothers and warn them about the torment they will experience if they do not change their ways. However, Abraham responds, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" (16:31). Granted this is a parable, but could it not be that Jesus was referencing a reality of what life after death could be like? John

¹ Timothy Tennent, Foundations for the Christian Faith, p. 28.

Wesley referred to the place of the dead as an intermediate place, which he also referred to as “paradise” or “the bosom of Abraham,” after Jesus’ parable.² This statement in the Apostles’ Creed refers to Jesus descending into the place of the dead and preaching to all the people there. Including, according to 1 Peter 3, the people from the days of Noah before the ark was built.

Think about the implications of that. And this is where we get into some speculation, and why this statement can be seen as so controversial. If we believe Jesus descended to the dead to preach to the people who ever lived – and by implication, everyone who ever will live, since Jesus entered into eternity when he did this – then everyone has an opportunity to hear Jesus preach. That will be amazing!

That would mean that people’s salvation is not dependent on what we decide here on earth. Jesus will give us all an opportunity to hear the gospel message directly from him. This is especially good news to all those who have ever lived who have either not made a decision to accept Christ as Savior, and all those who have never had an opportunity to know Jesus Christ as Savior. This means that people like my sibling who was stillborn – I don’t know if my sibling was to be a brother or sister – will have an opportunity to decide for Christ. All those people who lived in remote parts of the earth and had not heard the gospel, will hear it from Jesus’ lips. All those people who have mental handicapping conditions, or other earthly ailments that have prevented them from making a decision for Christ in this life, will have an opportunity to hear Jesus in the place of the dead. If people’s eternal destination depended only on the imperfect preaching of us human beings, then we would be in real trouble. There is a comfort in knowing that everyone will have an opportunity after death to hear the proclamation of the gospel from Jesus himself.

Now you can see why this statement in the Apostles’ Creed is so controversial. And perhaps you disagree with my interpretation of it. If nothing else, I hope I have at least given you something to think about if you had not thought about it much before.

The thing is, I believe we have a God of grace and of justice. He would not consign people to an eternity in everlasting torment if they never had the opportunity to hear the gospel. Even if they heard the gospel and rejected it here on this earth, they will have it perfectly presented to them by Jesus himself. If people reject his message, then it is they who condemn themselves to eternal damnation not because of a vindictive judgment by God.

In Ephesians 4:7-10 Paul the apostle writes:

² <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-happens-after-a-person-dies>

⁷ But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ⁸ This is why it^[a] says:

*"When he ascended on high,
he took many captives
and gave gifts to his people."^[b]*

⁹ (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions^[c]? ¹⁰ He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)

If we believe as the ecumenical version of the Apostles' Creed expects us to believe, then there is much more grace and mercy involved than many of us had ever hoped to believe. For those of you who have been living in discomfort, wondering if your loved one who died ever gave their life to Christ, take heart. We can believe that Jesus descended to the dead to proclaim the gospel to all those who are there, including your loved one, so that they too will have the opportunity to ascend with him forever in heaven.

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. (John 3:16-18)

Note: If this topic interests you, I commend to your reading N. T. Wright's book, "Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church."