

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
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**“The Apostles’ Creed,
Part V”
Psalm 49:10-15
Mark 15:33-39**

**Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 6, 2018**

Psalm 49:10-15

For he sees that even the wise die; the fool and the stupid alike must perish and leave their wealth to others. Their graves are their homes forever, their dwelling places to all generations, though they called lands by their own names. Man in his pomp will not remain; he is like the beasts that perish. This is the path of those who have foolish confidence; yet after them people approve of their boasts. *Selah*

Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; death shall be their shepherd, and the upright shall rule over them in the morning. Their form shall be consumed in Sheol, with no place to dwell. But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me. *Selah*

Mark 15:33-39

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And some of the bystanders hearing it said, “Behold, he is calling Elijah.” And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.” And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

“The Apostles’ Creed, Part V”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today, we continue in our series on the Apostles’ Creed. Last week we saw how the creed takes us from Jesus’ birth to the deep despair of his suffering, crucifixion, and death. We also saw how the turning point in Jesus’ mission starts with his burial, an ironic turn of events. I left us off with a cliffhanger, so today we’ll explore what it means to believe Jesus *descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead*.

Jesus’ descent into hell has raised many an eyebrow from first-time confessors. Of course, in good Baptist fashion, there are three ways one can understand this phrase. The first is to completely ignore any notion that Jesus descended into hell. After all, how can a perfectly sinless person, who was completely obedient to God’s commands ever end up in hell? That’s a very fair critique. In fact, the Mormon church believes that during the three days Jesus’ body was buried, he appeared in spiritual form to the indigenous peoples of the yet-to-be-discovered Americas. That is not recorded in Scripture, so we don’t hold that view. But it is important to note that there are groups of people out there who do hold this belief. Another way of glossing over this hard phrase is to suggest that Jesus experienced hell on earth. Not only was his passion and crucifixion a torment, but his entire life was not easy. He struggled daily against the devil,

against earthly foes, and even struggled in teaching his disciples. Jesus went through a living hell. Most Reformed Christians do not hold this view.

The second way of understanding this phrase comes from the Middle Ages. Catholics, some Lutherans, and even the Eastern Orthodox churches hold the view that Jesus did indeed descend into hell. But he did so as a mission of victory and liberation to the captives there. This view is called the “Harrowing of Hell.” The classical proof text for this view is found in I Peter 3:18-19:

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, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.

Here, the preaching “to the spirits in prison” is regarded as an allusion to Christ’s ministry of descending into hell and proclaiming the gospel to those there. This notion comes from the Medieval understanding of hell and purgatory. If you ever read Dante’s *Inferno*, you’ll see this depicted there. Essentially, this view stems from the argument that the Patriarchs & Prophets of Israel — Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, etc. — were not in heaven because they did not know Jesus in order to proclaim him as their Lord. And so, as the argument goes, Jesus descended into hell where the Patriarchs were residing and preached his gospel to them, thus freeing them from that bondage and bringing them into new life with him in heaven.

The problem with both of these views is made clear from Scripture itself. Peter’s text is somewhat ambiguous as to the identity of the spirits in prison and even more unclear as to the time when this mission took place. Moreover, other New Testament texts strongly suggest Jesus was elsewhere during the three days between his death and resurrection. In Luke 23:43, Jesus says to the thief at his side, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” Not, “you’ll be with me in paradise three days from now;” nor “give me a minute, I have to go to hell real quick, then we can go to paradise.” A more pressing example comes from both John 19:30 and Matthew 27:50, where Jesus commends or yields his spirit to God. Having the spirit of Jesus in the presence of the Father at the same time he is on a preaching mission in hell raises some very serious Christological problems. Which is why the traditional Reformed understanding takes a middle road. We do not believe Jesus descended into hell spiritually or physically, nor do we believe that Jesus’ life was merely hell on earth, or that his spirit was somewhere else apart from the Father.

The question at hand is, “did Jesus experience the full penalty of sin, namely, punishment in hell?” Calvin and others agree that Jesus did “descend into hell,” but that descent took place not after death and not during his life, but while he was still on the cross. This idea of hell is less as a place and more as a state of being. True hell is being forsaken by God. The whole reason we are Christians and confess the things we believe is because we desire a relationship with God, union and communion with our Heavenly Father and Creator. That’s heavenly bliss. So hellish torment is being forsaken by God, is having God turn against us. This is exactly what happened to Jesus. This is exactly what our New Testament lesson records for us. The climax of the cross is Jesus’ exclamation, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In this moment, God the Father

turned his back on Jesus, his Son. My friends, that is a feeling I cannot and dare not imagine, for to me, that is hell. Yet, that's precisely what we believe when we confess that Jesus *descended into hell*.

The next phrase, *the third day he rose again from the dead*, speaks to our belief that Jesus was truly and fully resurrected from the dead. In speaking to the gathered crowd at Pentecost, Peter proclaims, "God raised Jesus up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it." Peter is here making an assertion that the One who is so unique, in such communion with God, so anointed by God, and of such intrinsic holiness, could not possibly be held by death a moment longer than was necessary! To Peter, it was impossible, irrational, and unthinkable to assume that Jesus would stay dead! The resurrection of Jesus was going to happen. It had to happen. Everything we believe about Jesus hinges on his resurrection. While King David had no knowledge of Jesus the Nazarene, he did know that a resurrection was possible, otherwise his trust that, "God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me," is placed on a lie. The only way any of us can share in a resurrection is if the resurrection of Jesus truly happened.

This was so absolutely important for Paul, that the resurrection is at the center of a very lengthy chapter fifteen in his first letter to the Corinthians. Paul takes the time to logically consider the implications if Jesus had not been raised. He boldly asserts that if Jesus was not raised, then all preaching, all worship, even faith and life themselves are all in vain. The overall claim of the Apostles' Creed is that the Christian's belief is not a subjective experience. The Christian's preaching, worship, faith, and life have an object, and that object is the resurrected Christ. If Jesus is not risen, then our worship is meaningless. If Jesus is not risen, then our faith is meaningless. If Jesus is not risen, then our life is meaningless. In the middle of his treatise to the Corinthians, Paul essentially says, "If there is no resurrection, then all this suffering for Christ's sake that I have been subjected to is meaningless. I might as well join in the philosophy of 'eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.'" If Christ isn't raised from the dead, then death is the true and final meaning of human existence. I don't know about you, but that does not sound very hopeful.

Either life is meaningful or it is not. And the only way there can be meaning is to know that there is something beyond life. If this life ends in death, then this life's ultimate reality is the grave. Some may suggest that life's ultimate reality is the here and now, and therefore, one should live life to the fullest. I agree that one should enjoy one's life, especially since it is a gift from God. But, if life's ultimate reality is the grave, then why don't we all give into our carnal pleasures to rob, cheat, and kill? If this life is all that there is, why do we need morality? Why even need society?

The Christian cannot live this way. To falsify the resurrection is to nullify our call to justice, reconciliation, and peace. To falsify the resurrection is to void the command to love God wholly and love neighbor fully. Without the object of faith — the resurrected Christ — then all is meaningless. Paul leaves no middle ground. There is either meaning or there is not, there is no

maybe for the Christian. What appears to be a harsh contrast is Paul appealing to us to see the trustworthiness of Scripture. He witnessed the ancient writings being fulfilled in Christ, and with that experience he is imploring us to see that same fulfillment. This is the very essence of preaching and the very essence the Apostles' Creed puts forth: that God's word is trustworthy because, time after time, the Bible puts its finger on reality. And the Bible teaches that because of the very real resurrection of Christ, he is the first-born from the dead, that is the first among many; that he goes before us to prepare a home for us; and that he has conquered the final enemy that threatens our race, namely death itself. Because of the trustworthiness of Scripture and the resurrection of Jesus, Christian preaching, Christian worship, Christian faith, and Christian life are not futile exercises but true and powerful witnesses of God's grace and glory. This is what it means to believe that *on the third day he rose again from the dead*

Later in this service we will celebrate Jesus' death and resurrection when we share in the Supper he instituted. In the invitation to the Table, I, quite contrary to our denomination, encourage each of us to examine ourselves before partaking in this meal. I do so because I take Paul seriously when he says that to eat and drink without discernment is to eat and drink judgment against oneself. When I say this, I am not trying to strike fear or doubt into your hearts. Rather, I am reminding all of us, myself included, to make sure we know where our focus is. Both the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Supper force us to answer the question: are we taking the Gospel message seriously — are we trusting in the saving death and the life-giving resurrection of Jesus Christ. In answering, you discern within your heart your relationship with Jesus.

Let us pray. Sovereign God, your holiness is beyond measure and your omnipotence beyond human understanding. In your holiness and power, you stand in judgment over sin. And we are sinful. I am sinful. Forgive us, we pray, that we may come to know your grace and truth. Open our hearts and minds to the work of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Savior, who was crucified, dead, buried, and raised from the grave. His work is life-giving and awe-inspiring. We ask that the Holy Ghost enter into our being, align our desires with your will, and birth within us a faith that imitates Christ. May we, who will partake of his bread and his cup, be empowered and encouraged to proclaim his gospel message to our neighbors near and far. It is in the glorious and precious name of Jesus that we pray. Amen.