

**God the Son: His Death<sup>i</sup>**  
**Matthew 27:11-54**  
**Week 6**

**Opening**

Ask if anyone would like to open in prayer. They can pray on their own or use the prayer printed below. It also might be a good idea to reach out to a group member prior to your meeting and ask them ahead of time if they'd be willing to open in prayer. That's a great way to encourage participation without putting anyone on the spot.

*God of ages, you have called us to this place at this time with these people to look more closely at ancient words of faith. As we encounter this creed, send your Holy Spirit to guide our discussions. Give us a humble eagerness and imaginative thoughtfulness that our eyes might be opened anew to the power of the faith we profess. We pray in the name of the One whose passion and resurrection we anticipate this Lenten season, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Depending on time constraints you may want to take a bit of extra time to check in with folks and see how they're doing. You could also wait and do this at the end of the session before closing in prayer.

It may be a good practice to recite the Creed together each week as we are taking a closer look at each line. This week, we'll discuss the line **"I believe in Jesus Christ... who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell..."**

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

**Check-in question**

What are some typical responses to suffering? Has suffering (your own or someone else's) caused you to question God's love? If so, what help have you found from Scripture?

## Jesus Christ's Passion

Suffering is a mystery that causes anguish to many Christians. It seems to call the love of God into question. The suffering of Jesus Christ on the cross at Calvary does not explain suffering. It does, however, reveal that God himself is willing and able to allow himself to be subject to all the pain and suffering that his creation experiences. We are not talking of a God who stands far off from his world, aloof and distant from its problems. We are dealing with a loving God who has entered into our human situation, who became human and lived among us as one of us.

Jesus Christ suffered and died "so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14-15). We are not offering some soothing words to ease the pain of death and dying, words with no foundation in reality, such as saying "It's all right" when in reality things could not be worse. We are talking about a real and decisive victory over death, by which its power is broken. A new attitude to death and dying is possible because a new era has dawned in Jesus Christ.

The reference to Pontius Pilate in the Apostles' Creed firmly anchors the creed to history. The gospel affirms that God himself entered into history in order to meet us and redeem us. God came down to meet us where we are, in time and space. The gospel is not just about *ideas*; it is about God *acting, and continuing to act*, in history.

The gospel is not merely about the fact that Jesus died, nor even that he was executed, nor yet that he was crucified. He died *for us*. Christianity is about the astonishing and thrilling truth that he died in order that we might be forgiven. Paul makes a clear distinction between the *event* of the death of Christ and the *significance* of this event. That Christ died is a simple matter of history; that Christ died *for our sins* is the gospel itself.

When the creed says that Jesus "descended into hell" it is a statement that Jesus really did die. For the New Testament writers, Christ was not raised "from death" (an abstract idea) but "from the dead." The Greek term literally means "out of those who are dead." He did not merely *seem* to die; he actually died and joined those who had died before him. And then, in the glorious act of resurrection, God raised him from the dead.

→ **That puzzling line "descended into hell"** (*I found this to be a helpful and rather succinct explanation of some of the controversy surrounding this part of the creed.*)

Of the 12 entries in our Book of Confessions, odds are you're most familiar with the Apostles' Creed. Every branch of Christianity's family tree accepts it. It's often recited at baptisms, as it was originally a baptismal creed. And, since it's only 110 words long, if you have any creed memorized, this is probably the one. But of those 110 words, four have tripped up Christians for centuries: *He descended into hell*.

Appearing between “crucified, dead, and buried” and “the third day he rose again,” “descended into hell” wasn’t originally part of the Creed. It was sometime around A.D. 400, in the writings of Rufinus, a monk and theologian, that the first mention of Jesus’ descent appeared. In A.D. 750, the Latin church made it an official part of the Creed.

But why add this line? It all depends on whom you ask.

Let’s start by understanding the definition of the word “hell” in the Hebrew (*sheol*) and Greek (*hades*). Both translate to mean “land of the dead.” So, like Rufinus, some folks believe that this clause simply means that Jesus, being fully human and fully divine, experienced a true human death. Critics of this view, though, ask why it was necessary to include it in the Creed.

Others argue that “hell” refers to Gehenna, a valley outside of Jerusalem that was originally used for child sacrifice and later used as a garbage dump, which became Hebrew “shorthand” for a place of everlasting punishment. Further complicating matters, Gehenna advocates have different views on why Jesus would have gone there:

- **To suffer the consequences of human depravity.** Thomas Aquinas held this view, but critics argue that Jesus’ statements on the cross (“Today you will be with me in paradise” and “It is finished!”) contradict it.
- **To preach the gospel, thus giving hell’s inhabitants a second chance at salvation.** This view is based on a particular reading of Ephesians 4:8–10 and 1 Peter 3:18–20, where the Scriptures seem to indicate that Jesus might have visited the lands of the dead to save those who were there. Critics say this view forces an interpretation originally not intended.

Other views, including John Calvin’s as well as that found in the Heidelberg Catechism, assert that “hell” shouldn’t be understood literally. Instead, Jesus’ separation from God on the cross constitutes ultimate suffering.

So what do Presbyterians believe about Jesus “descending into hell”? All of the above ... none of the above ... some combination of the above. (Seriously, you thought I was going to solve a centuries-old theological squabble in one column?)

While we might not necessarily agree on the meaning of this phrase, we can agree on the role it plays as part of our confessional heritage.

As Presbyterians, we take a Reformed view of the Bible and the church’s creeds. In the words of our ordination vows, “the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments [are], by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word to [us],” and we “receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do.” That’s a lot of fancy language that means we believe that the Bible is the authority by which we understand and live out our relationship with God and each other. Scripture gets the final word. Our confessions serve as conversation partners. They come out of

specific contexts, giving us snapshots of how those siblings in Christ in those times and places understood what being Christian meant. For example, the Reformer Theodore Beza didn't agree with John Calvin, as he preferred to omit "he descended into hell." Calvin kept it.

Creeds aren't supposed to give us all of the answers. Rather, they help us ask better questions. They drive us back to the Bible, where, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can encounter the love of God expressed through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And that, regardless of our own understanding of Jesus' descent, is our takeaway from these four words in the Apostles' Creed. By reciting these words, we affirm that Jesus loves us so much that he was willing to make — and be — the ultimate sacrifice for us. We celebrate that there's nowhere devoid of God's grace and mercy. And we rejoice that death no longer has the final say.<sup>1</sup>

## **Read texts in chunks to correlate with the questions below**

**Matthew 27:11-26**

**Matthew 27: 27- 44**

**Matthew 27: 45-54**

### **Initial Reactions**

1. What from these passages confuses, inspires, or resonates with you? What questions or curiosities do you have about this passage?
2. What does this story tell us about God? What does this story tell us about humanity?
3. Were there any images, stories or insights that stuck out to you from Sunday's sermon?

### **Matthew 27: 11-26**

4. What did Pilate make of Jesus?
5. What does Matthew's account of the choice between Jesus and Barabbas show us about the significance of the cross?

### **Matthew 27: 27-44**

6. What did the Romans make of the claim that Jesus is God's King? What do you think they expected from a king?
7. What did the Jews make of the claim that Jesus was Savior? What do you think they expected from a savior?
8. Jesus did not match people's expectations of a king or savior. What kind of a King and Savior is he then?
9. How do we as Christians still have the wrong expectations of Jesus?

---

<sup>1</sup> Craiglow, Jodi. *The Apostles' Creed question that everyone ponders*. Presbyterians Today: Did Jesus really descend into hell? <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/pt-0320-wpb/>

### **Matthew 27:45-54**

10. What is the significance of the darkness in verse 45? Compare Psalm 105: 26-28 (a reflection on the Exodus story and the plagues that befell Egypt).
11. What is the significance of the torn curtain in verse 51? Compare Exodus 26:31-35 (a description of the tabernacle in the wilderness).

### **Heidelberg Catechism Question**

Each week, a question from the Heidelberg Catechism will be included with this study guide. The hope is that COB folks would take time to reflect on this question during the week as it gives more framework for the Creed as we study together.

#### *Question 31.*

*Why is he called "Christ," meaning "anointed"?*

*Answer:*

*Because he has been ordained by God the Father and has been anointed with the Holy Spirit to be our chief prophet and teacher who fully reveals to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our deliverance; our only high priest who has delivered us by the one sacrifice of his body, and who continually pleads our cause with the Father; and our eternal king who governs us by his Word and Spirit, and who guards us and keeps us in the freedom he has won for us.*

### **Now or Later**

- To rekindle your memory of the events named in this part of the creed, re-read the four Gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Read one account per day for four days, or read all four in one sitting. What details had you forgotten? What details were somewhat different from what you remembered? What parts hold special significance for you right now?
- To get a sense of the importance of Christ death and resurrection in the earliest preaching of the apostles, study Acts 2:22-36.

### **Closing**

Check in if you haven't already done so and ask for any prayer requests. Encourage group members to write down these requests and follow up as necessary. Close with prayer.

---

<sup>i</sup> McGrath, Allister. *Life Guide Bible Studies: Apostles' Creed*. Intervarsity Press, 2016.