

**QUESTION #26: “BETWEEN RANSOM AND RESURRECTION:  
WHAT HAPPENED TO JESUS BETWEEN DYING AND RISING?”  
(Hebrews 13:11-15)**

**Along with:**

**“How Were OT Saints Made Righteous; When Did They Go To Heaven?”**

1.12.20

**INTRODUCTION — First Question**

Throughout the history of the Christian church, certain creeds have developed to help explain in a clear concise manner what we as Christians believe. In fact, the English word “creed” comes from the Latin word *credo*, which means, “I believe.” For us as a body of believers, it is an attempt to summarize the main points of our Christians faith. Because it is a summary, it is not exhaustive — in other words, it is not a detailed analysis or explanation of beliefs; it is simply a statement of our most important, basic beliefs which are foundational to what we as Christians say we believe.

Initially, the first creed of early Christians was a simple, three-word declaration: “Jesus is Lord.” Anyone saying that was thought to be a follower of Jesus because it was Jesus Himself who had said that no one could serve two masters. “Jesus is Lord” was a very definitive statement of where a person’s loyalties lay. And no one in their right mind was likely to say such a thing without being absolutely convinced that Jesus Christ was truly who He said He was, for such a declaration of allegiance also carried with it a very ominous consequence: The ruling Roman Empire demanded emperor worship; any statement suggesting that only Jesus of Nazareth was worthy of worship put you in opposition to a government that could have you killed for such a belief. In addition, this statement declared not only an allegiance but also an acknowledgement of who Jesus truly was, particularly in his relation to God.

Eventually, however, as Christianity spread out from its cradle in Jerusalem and Judea and further into Asia and eventually into Europe, it became necessary to be able to offer a bit more detailed explanation of what exactly Christians believed. Thus, was born the creeds.

While we are not a liturgical church, in other words, a church that makes constant references to our statement of faith and historical creeds and, in fact, incorporates those things into our weekly worship, many of us may be at least casually familiar with some of the more well-known ones:

- 1) The Apostles’ Creed — basic Christianity (the one we’re looking at today)
- 2) The Nicene Creed (325 AD, revised 381 AD) — affirmed the full deity of Christ
- 3) The Chalcedonian Creed (451 AD) — affirmed the dual nature (full and complete deity/full and complete humanity) of Christ.

Now the Apostles Creed is a bit unique. The Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds were developed during church councils, at specific points in time, and to answer specific questions — in their cases, Christ’s deity and his dual nature. By contrast, the so-called Apostles Creed (the apostles themselves had nothing to do with it as they had passed away well before it began to come into being) was gradually formed over the years from about 200-750 AD. In its earliest versions, the phrase “he descended into hell” was not even included. This phrase did not make its first appearance until approximately 650 AD. In fact, when it first appeared, it did so with the understanding of simply meaning that Christ descended into a grave (which is an alternative meaning of the word *hades*). Later, when the phrase “was buried” was incorporated into this evolving creed, the additional idea of “descended into hell” had to have some kind of explanation that did not contradict the Scriptures.

This morning we are going to look at one of the statements of the Apostles’ Creed. The creed itself is essentially 12 statements of faith that encapsulate what exactly Christians believe, and those statements go like this:

- 1) I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

- 2) And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord;
- 3) Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary;
- 4) Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; [he descended into hell;]
- 5) The third day he rose from the dead;
- 6) He ascended into heaven; and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father almighty;
- 7) From thence he shall come to judge the quick (the living) and the dead.
- 8) I believe in the Holy Spirit;
- 9) The holy “catholic” (universal/Christian) Church; [which is] the communion of saints;
- 10) The forgiveness of sins;
- 11) The resurrection of the body;
- 12) And the life everlasting. Amen.

Our first of two questions this morning: The fourth statement: “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; *he descended into hell*. A very basic question: Is that true? Did Jesus actually descend into hell? If so, what did that look like? The simple answer involves three views: Sort of, no and yes. But let’s maybe flesh those out a bit more.

The confusion is caused because that specific phrase of Jesus “descending into hell” is never found in Scripture. Now that by itself is no big deal; we have mentioned before that a word many of us have become familiar with — “Rapture” — is not found in Scripture (that is the Latin translation for the Greek *harpazo*, which means to be “caught up”). Yet we know that coming event to be biblically sound, so the word used to describe it is accepted. Another word — “Trinity” — is itself never found in Scripture. Yet the idea of what the Trinity is — God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit — is found in many places in Scripture and, therefore, we accept the word that has come to reference that biblical reality. So just because a word or phrase is not explicitly in the Bible doesn’t invalidate it.

However, that also means that we have to be very careful in making sure that our creeds line up with Biblical teaching. While the Scriptures are inerrant — meaning without mistakes in their original writings — creeds cannot make that claim. They are written by fallible human beings, sometimes operating with flawed logic or incomplete understanding of exactly what the Scriptures are teaching. Creeds need to align with Scripture — not the other way around.

So back to the original question: What about Jesus “descending into hell?” Is that an accurate statement? Is there Biblical support? Let’s expand on those three (3) basic views.

### TEXT

***The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through His own blood. Let us, then, go to Him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace He bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise — the fruit of lips that openly profess His name — Hebrews 13:11-15.***

The first view suggests that Christ did indeed descend into hell, but it occurred while he was actually still on the cross — a view championed by reformer John Calvin — and it’s based on a section of Hebrews. Now one reason that Hebrews is such a wonderful NT book is how it connects the sacrifices of the Old Covenant (the Mosaic Law) with the “better” sacrifice of Christ that introduced the New Covenant.

When an animal was brought to the priest to become a sin offering, the first thing that would happen would be that the priest (for himself) or the one bringing the sacrifice for sin would lay his hands upon the head of the animal being sacrificed. This gesture symbolized two incredibly important things:

- 1) Placing the hands on the animal meant the person was feeling the life leaving the animal, making the person intimately connected with the concept of “life for life.”

- 2) The sins of the person bringing the sacrifice were being imputed, in other words, transferred from the person who had sinned to the animal being sacrificed. Essentially it is the animal that is now declared “guilty” for the sin that has been committed against the Lord. Leviticus 4 is the basis for this picture. But here’s the interesting part; God went on to tell Moses that, after taking some of the animal’s blood into the Tabernacle: **“[T]he hide of the bull and all its flesh, as well as the head and legs, the internal organs and the intestines — that is, all the rest of the bull — he must take outside the camp to a place ceremonially clean, where the ashes are thrown, and burn it there in a wood fire on the ash heap” — God speaking, Leviticus 4:11-12.**

So, what was God saying by burning the animal “outside the camp?” It goes back to the relationship that God had declared between Himself and the nation of Israel. At the time when God is describing this sacrificial system, Israel is in the midst of traveling to the Promised Land. During those travels, God was dwelling with His people by His presence in the Tabernacle. In other words, He had a special relationship with the people *inside* the camp. While He certainly would have been active among people living outside the nation of Israel, His special relationship was with Israel. He had stated this very clearly, telling the nation through Moses: **“I will take you as My own people, and I will be your God” — God speaking, Exodus 6:7a.**

So, people outside the camp were not in the same kind of relationship as the people inside the camp. So, being outside the camp meant being outside of God’s covenantal love, favor and relationship. A NT version of this dynamic would be Paul’s words in Romans: ***[W]e know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose — Paul, Romans 8:28.*** That is describing God’s relationship specifically with His kids, all those who have surrendered their lives to come into the kingdom of His Son. That verse is not meant for people outside the kingdom because God is not dwelling through His Son in the lives of people outside the kingdom. People living outside the kingdom are living specifically contrary to God’s purpose for they do not love Him.

To extend that idea, where in eternity is God NOT going to be dwelling in covenantal relationship? The answer, of course, is hell. While the saints in heaven will forever enjoy God’s fellowship and love, those in hell will find only God’s wrath and judgment. It is a place, to borrow from the OT, decidedly “outside the camp.” Remember how Jesus described the occupants of hell: **“thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 8:12.** And, again borrowing from the imagery of the sacrificed animal’s body being taken outside the camp and burned with fire, NT references to hell most often describe hell with that same imagery: as a fiery furnace, as the eternal fire, as an unquenchable fire and, in the book of Revelation, as a lake of fire. And as if to confirm that, the book of Jude encourages Christians to ***save others by snatching them from the fire — Jude 23a.***

The point this view is making? Jesus was the sacrificed animal, receiving all our sins, whose blood paid the price for those sins. John the Baptist clearly understood this when he saw Jesus: **“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” — John the Baptist, John 1:29b.** As Paul said so well: ***God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God — Paul, II Corinthians 5:21.*** And He was killed “outside the camp” as He was slaughtered outside the gates of Jerusalem. And because He bore all the sins of the world, He was seen by God just as the sacrificed animals in the OT were seen: as sin itself. Jesus Christ became our sin and, as such, received all the fire of the full wrath and judgment of God. He was completely consumed by that wrath — which occurred “outside the camp.”

In this view, Jesus did descend into hell — but doing so as He was sacrificed on the cross. He bore all of God’s wrath — including hell. That means there is no hell left for those whose lives are found in Christ Jesus. He experienced hell as part of God’s wrath and judgment for sin so Christians would never have to. And He walked out of the tomb three days later to confirm that God had accepted His sacrifice for sin.

Another view would simply say, “No; Jesus did not descend into hell” — despite the view of the Apostles’ Creed. We’ve already mentioned that Calvin believed that, as the recipient of ALL of God’s wrath and judgment, Christ necessarily also had to endure the pains of hell — which makes the idea of “descending” into hell to be more of a figurative, metaphorical portrait of what happened to Christ. But if we take the Apostles’ Creed in its natural sense, is it biblically correct?

The Bible teaches the following concerning what happened to Christ — none of which support the idea of His “descending into hell”:

- 1) When Peter gave his great Pentecost Day sermon in Jerusalem, he quoted from David and Psalm 16: ***[M]y heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead (Hades, “the grave”), nor will you let your faithful one see decay — David, Psalms 16:9-10 (quoted by Peter in Acts 2:27).*** This passage teaches that, unlike what happened to others, including David, Christ’s body did not remain in the grave, subject to decay, but he was resurrected.
- 2) In Paul’s letter to the Roman church, he says: ***[T]he righteousness that is by faith says: “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down) or ‘Who will descend into the deep?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)” — Paul, Romans 10:6-7 (quoting Deuteronomy 30:12-13).*** What Paul is trying to emphasize here is the nearness of Jesus to His followers. As he goes on to point out: ***But what does it say? “The word (meaning Jesus, similar to John 1:1) is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim — Paul, Romans 10:8 (quoting Deuteronomy 13:14).*** Paul is emphasizing that Jesus is not inaccessibly high (the heavens) or inaccessibly low (the deep, using the Greek word *abyssos*). He is right with us.
- 3) In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he writes: ***This is why it says: “When He ascended on high, He took many captives and gave gifts to His people.” (What does “He ascended” mean except that He also descended to the lower, earthly regions (Greek: “lower regions which are the earth)? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) — Paul, Ephesians 4:8-10 (quoting Psalm 68:18).*** In this passage, Paul is referring not to Jesus “descending into hell” but rather His descent from His heavenly home to His incarnation on earth — what we celebrate at Christmas in Bethlehem.
- 4) One of the more confusing passages on this subject is found in the apostle Peter’s first letter. He writes: ***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. After being made alive, He went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits — to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built — I Peter 3:18-20a.*** OK; so, if Christ “preached to the spirits in prison,” doesn’t that imply that He would have had to descend into hell to accomplish that? But look at Peter’s words: the proclaiming that he refers to was to spirits ***who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.*** There are many sinners in hell; why just preach to those from Noah’s day? And the Bible makes clear that there is no opportunity for repentance or redemption following death. So, what would be the point? The more likely explanation of this passage is that it is referring to what Christ did *in the Spirit* at the time of Noah — preaching through Noah to all those hostile to his message. Think of it like this: I could say: “I knew President Trump when he was in college.” That’s a totally fine statement, but no one would take it to mean that I was saying that Mr. Trump was the president when he was in college. I would simply be saying that I knew the man who is now the president when he was in college. Peter’s description of Jesus preaching ***to the imprisoned spirits*** is the same thing.
- 5) Which is also the point to be taken from another verse in Peter’s first letter, where he writes: ***For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to human standards in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard***

*to the spirit — I Peter 4:6.* Peter’s audience did have a concern for those believers who had died. Those left behind had wondered, “Did the gospel benefit them, since they died the same as sinners?” Peter’s words tell them (and us) that the point of the gospel was not to save them from physical death but to save them from spiritual death. So, the people *now dead*, in other words physically dead now, were alive when the gospel truth was presented to them.

So, what does the Bible tell us about Jesus’ death? It tells us that Christ in His death experienced the same things that all Christians experience: His physical body remained on earth, but His spirit entered immediately into the presence of God. Then, in a preview of what Christians all have to look forward to, Easter saw Jesus reunited with His body — His resurrection body — and alive again.

But, according to this view, despite its long tradition, the Apostles Creed is in error on this point. (An old mistake is still a mistake.) Most importantly, there seems to be no Scripture to defend it. The Bible says, “No, Jesus did not descend into hell.” As a result, that clause should be dropped from this particular creed’s recitation.

The last view bases itself on both I Peter 3:18-20a and II Peter 2:4, which says: *For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment — II Peter 2:4.* The idea is that Jesus in His human spirit (as opposed to the Holy Spirit) went to a specific place not Sheol or Hades or Hell — but *Tartarus*, meaning “prison” and “cast down to hell” — where some wicked angels are confined, and announced (versus preached) His complete and total victory over death and Satan, and then pronounced righteous judgment on them, assuring them that their own judgment was now sealed. Therefore, in this sense, Jesus did “descend into hell” to accomplish a specific detail of His redemptive victory.

BOTTOM LINE: All of these views are interesting and held by people who have devoutly and studiously pursued understanding this issue. This is not a salvation issue — neither is holding to or reciting any creed. Jesus said in His Gethsemane prayer: “[Y]our word is truth” — *Jesus Christ, John 17:17b.* God’s word, the Bible, is what we need to hold to and recite. As Paul said so well: It is *the Holy Scriptures [that] are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work — Paul, II Timothy 3:15b-17.* And what we can know, what should be our focus, is that Jesus Christ became sin, became all sin, for all time, to wash away all sin by means of the blood He shed on the cross, to offer us the only way to be seen by God as God Himself sees Jesus: *without blemish or defect — I Peter 1:19b* and, as we heard earlier, Jesus did all this *once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself — Hebrews 9:26b.* THAT we can know!

## INTRODUCTION — Second Question

I put these two questions together because, in a sense, they both relate to discussions of what Jesus Christ did for us by means of the cross. This question is sort of a two-part question by itself: How were people made righteous before the time of Jesus Christ, and then, how did they get to heaven?

For the first question, we go all the way back to the book of Genesis, to His leading in the life of Abraham. We read this in Genesis 15 (summarize): *[T]he word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, what can You give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.” Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars — if indeed you can count them.” Then He said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to Him as righteousness — *Genesis 15:1-6.* The point being made is clear: It is not anything Abraham is doing in terms of works. It is faith and faith alone that*

has made him righteous in God's eyes. It is a complete trust that God has said it and, because it is God who has said it, that settles it. It is at the core of Paul's message to the Ephesians: ***For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast — Paul, Ephesians 2:8-9.*** It really is as the writer of Hebrews explains it (and I love how the NASB translates it): ***Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval — Hebrews 11:1-2 (NASB),*** going on to say: ***[W]ithout faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him — Hebrews 11:6.*** These opening verses from the famous "faith hall of fame" chapter of Hebrews 11 also contain this explanation of how people in the OT found God's approval: ***All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. . . . These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect — Hebrews 11:13-14, 39-40.***

So, one of the really cool pictures that Hebrews 11 shares with us is that these were all (from our perspective) OT saints but, what's more, a number of them were considered saints long before the sacrificial system that God put in place through Moses. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph — all these are included in this chapter of amazing people of faith. And their faith was seen and commended by God long any sacrificial system was in place for the forgiveness of sins, and obviously even longer before Christ's ultimate sacrifice for all the sins of all the world. Yet, because of their faith, all of us who are looking forward to heaven can also look forward to spending eternity with these OT heroes of the faith.

So, the second part: How did these people who pleased God before Jesus Christ go to heaven? It appears that there was a place called *Sheol*, a place where all who died went. But, as we see in Jesus' story in Luke 16, the place of the dead was divided into two sections — one for the righteous (such as those mentioned in Hebrews 11) and another section for the unrighteous, with a wide gulf fixed between the two areas, which no one could cross. It is thought that the OT righteous existed in some sense of limbo — separated from the ungodly, but not yet in the presence of God; then, when Christ ascended into heaven (also signaling that His redemptive work was finished), He emptied *Sheol* of the righteous souls who joined Him in heaven. But at the same time, if we look at this story in Luke, we will notice that Lazarus (the poor man) was already in a place of rest and comfort, while the rich man would have done anything to join. This does suggest that, like NT saints, OT saints also were immediately upon their death drawn into the presence of God.

There are some interesting Biblical hints at what might have happened with OT saints. First of all, we have the two OT people who never died — Enoch and Elijah — who were transported directly to heaven without ever dealing with death. Were there others there to greet them when they arrived? The Bible does not say.

The prophet Daniel suggested that there would be a general resurrection — in other words, that everyone who had lived would be brought back to life: ***[A]t that time your people — everyone whose name is found written in the book — will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever — Daniel 12:1b-3.*** So, even though all will be resurrected, their final outcome will not be the same for everybody. And beyond that, this is expressed as a future hope, so the question about OT saints remains somewhat unanswered.

David also adds some idea to this question. His famous 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm concludes with these words: ***Surely Your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord***

*forever — David, Psalms 23:6.* In the context of this verse, the phrase “the house of the Lord” may in fact be referring to heaven. And, in Psalm 73, the choir director Asaph is inspired to write this: *Yet I am always with you; You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with Your counsel, and afterward You will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever — Psalms 73:23-26.* “You will take me to glory.” The text does not make clear whether this is the expectation of every God-fearing life or, like with Daniel, a future hope. But certainly, the end result is one of great promise and clarity.

And maybe Jesus gives the best picture of the end times for Old Testament believers; once when He was confronted with the Sadducees about the idea of marriage in the afterlife, He responded: *“[A]bout the resurrection of the dead — have you not read what God said to you, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 22:31-32.* Jesus is talking about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as if they are, at that moment, present-tense alive.

So, it is possible that two things are true:

- 1) OT saints were, like NT saints, absent from the body and present with the Lord (Paul, II Corinthians 5:8).
- 2) There may indeed have been additional blessings for these saints when Christ returned to heaven upon His ascension. The Bible simply doesn’t say.

**BOTTOM LINE:** While we cannot be sure of exactly what it looked like; we can know that we will enjoy eternity with the OT saints — including some of our favorite Bible story heroes. Personally, I can hardly wait to spend time with Daniel. According to Scripture, they will all be there.

## CONCLUSION

It can sometimes be difficult to field questions that come from different theological perspectives, whether they be mainstream or completely off the grid. That is why it is so important to know what the Word of God says. That stuff we can know; that stuff we can share. It’s always about *speaking the truth in love — Paul, Ephesians 4:15a*; it’s always about *[a]lways being prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have — I Peter 3:15b*. It’s always about *“do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 10:19-20*. And most of all, it’s always about Jesus being *“the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through [Him]” — Jesus Christ, John 14:6*. Because as Peter said so emphatically to the members of a Jewish ruling council who were so determined to wipe out this new way of believing: *“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” — Peter, Acts 4:12*. Let’s pray!