

THE APOSTLES' CREED: CHRIST'S PASSION

1 Corinthians 15:1–4

Tonight's focus: "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell."¹ This section of the Creed focuses on the events Christ's connected with Christ's suffering, commonly called his Passion.

Suffered under Pontius Pilate

- The penalty to which we were subject was imposed upon Jesus. Christ allowed himself to be condemned before a mortal and wicked man.
- The condemnation under Pilate provides a death in which Christ visibly takes our condemnation and guilt upon himself (as opposed to murder by thieves or a mob).
- **Isa 53:5**: "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed." **Isa 53:12**: "he was numbered with the transgressors." **Ps 69:4**: "Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head; many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy me. I am forced to restore what I did not steal." **Cf. Matt Luke 23:4**: "I find no guilt in this man."
- Calvin: "We must, above all, remember this substitution, lest we tremble and remain anxious throughout life—as if God's righteous vengeance, which the Son of God has taken upon himself, still hunger over us."²

Crucified:

- Not only death but an accursed death. **Deut 21:23**: "anyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse." Quoted in **Gal 3:13–14**: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole." He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."
- The righteous takes our shame and penalty so that we can be declared righteous. **2 Cor 5:21**: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Dead and buried:

Two emphases: "liberation from the death to which we had been bound, and mortification of the flesh."³

- So complete is Christ paying the price for our sin that he suffered unto death. "Death held us captive under its yoke; Christ, in our stead, gave himself over to its power to deliver us from it."⁴ **Heb 2:9**: "by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone."

¹ Much of the material in this lesson follows John Calvin's treatment of the Apostles' Creed in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.16.5–12.

² Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.5.

³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.7.

⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.7.

- “he let himself be swallowed up by death, as it were, not to be engulfed in its abyss, but rather to engulf it that must soon have engulfed us.”⁵ **Heb 2:14–15**: “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity 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.”
- Christ’s death thus also frees us from sin’s power (Rom 6; Col 2).

Descended into hell:

Eastern churches omit this phrase along with the communion of saints.⁶ The clause was added in the early 5th century and officially approved in the 7th.⁷ Some in the time of the Reformation called for its omission⁸ on the grounds that it was not biblical and there was no consensus on its meaning.⁹

Should we retain the phrase, and if so, what does it mean?

Three main views on the meaning of the phrase:¹⁰

1. Christ literally descended into hell (a local descent). Several variations:
 - a. “Jesus went to hell to continue his sufferings on the Christian’s behalf in order to complete salvation. This view does not do justice to the phrase, *It is finished*.”
 - b. “Jesus went to hell to offer a second chance to those who were already in hell. Scripture, however, never suggests that there is a second chance to believe after death.”
 - c. “Jesus went to hell to pronounce victory to those who already believed in him. This view rests on the belief that *hades* was a place between Paradise and Gehenna, the ‘limbo of the fathers.’ Scripture, however, does not teach an intermediate place. Hebrews is clear that the hope of the former saints is presence with God. This presence is manifested in heaven, not an intermediate place called *hades*.”
 - d. “Jesus [*sic*] human soul in union with his body went to hell to declare triumph over Satan and his demons. This view is built upon a particular interpretation of 1 Peter 3.”
 - i. 1 Pet 3:18–20: “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

⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.7.

⁶ Alister McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 31.

⁷ Douglas Sean O’Donnell, “The Historic Christian Creeds,” in *The Pastor’s Book: A Comprehensive and Practical Guide to Pastoral Ministry*, ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 325.

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.80

⁹ Charles Barrett, sermon notes on the Apostles’ Creed.

¹⁰ Charles Barrett, sermon notes on the Apostles’ Creed. Barrett gives a fourth view (“Descent as a reference to or descriptor for the curse of death”), but we just address three here.

- being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water.”
- ii. Whatever this tricky verse means, notice that it locates this proclamation after the resurrection. The proclamation is not taking place between Christ’s death and resurrection but after the resurrection.
2. Descent as a synonym for “buried.”
 - a. Ps 16:11: “For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell (Heb. *Sheol*, Gk. *Hades*); Neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.” Cited in Acts 2:27, 31 with reference to Christ’s resurrection. The two lines in Ps 16 are parallel: hell refers to the corruption of the grave.
 - b. Reflected in WLC 50: “*Wherein consisted Christ’s humiliation after his death?* Christ’s humiliation after his death consisted in his being buried, and continuing in the state of the dead, and under the power of death till the third day; which hath been otherwise expressed in these words, *He descended into hell*” (emphasis original).
 - c. Early Fathers also expressed this view, and the Creed reflects this scriptural language in the phrase “he descended into hell.”
 3. A description or metaphor for Christ’s sufferings.
 - a. Calvin: “it was expedient at the same time for him [Christ] to undergo the severity of God’s vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his just judgment. For this reason, he must also grapple hand to hand with the armies of hell and the dread of everlasting death.” “no wonder, then, if he is said to have descended into hell, for he suffered the death that God in his wrath had inflicted upon the wicked!”¹¹
 - a. Heidelberg Catechism 44: “Why is it added: He descended into Hades? That in my greatest temptation I may be assured that Christ, my Lord, by his inexpressible anguish, pains, and terrors which he suffered in his soul on the cross and before, has redeemed me from the anguish and the torments of hell.
 - b. Matt 27:46: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
 - c. Against the charge that a reference to the Passion after the burial does not make sense, Calvin’s response is wise: “the Creed sets forth what Christ suffered in the sight of men, and then appositely speaks of that invisible and incomprehensible judgment which he underwent in the sight of God in order that we might know not only that Christ’s body was given as the price of our redemption, but that he paid a greater and more excellent price in suffering in his soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man.”¹²

Should we retain this phrase in our recitation of the Creed? Yes, for two reasons:

1. It does reflect scriptural language, especially Ps 16:11; Acts 2:27, 31.
2. Whether we take views two or three, both views reflect the teaching of Scripture.¹³

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.10.

¹² Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.10.

¹³ For further study, see Daniel Hyde, *In Defense of the Descent: A Response to Contemporary Critics*, Explorations in Reformed Confessional Theology (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), and Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.8–12.