

We Believe: Foundations of Christian Faith

Session 3: Jesus Christ the Son (Death, Resurrection, Ascension)

Rev. Dr. Bob Kaylor

The Nicene Creed

Death, Resurrection, Ascension

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures;

he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism

Question 27

Wherein did Christ's humiliation consist?

Christ's humiliation consisted in His being born, and that in a low condition, made under the law, undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God, and the cursed death of the cross; in being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time.

Why did Jesus die?

Religious Reasons

- Actions and proclamations against the Temple (Matthew 21:12-17; 24:1-2; 26:61)
- Messianic claims - a mortal Messiah and a cosmic ruler (Matthew 26:63-64)
 - Daniel 7:13-14 - “The Son of Man”
 - Implies that Jesus will be their judge, not the other way around
 - “From now on...” present reality
- To get Jesus executed, the religious elite needed to transform these charges into political ones

Why did Jesus die?

Political Reasons

- Jewish leaders charged Jesus with implying treason against Rome (Luke 23:2)
 - Perverting the nation's loyalty to Rome
 - Forbidding payment of taxes
 - Claiming to be a King
- Jesus was innocent of these charges - his kingship was of a different Kingdom

“Suffered under Pontius Pilate”

Why do the Creeds mention him?

- Only two people mentioned in the Creeds: Mary (birth) and Pilate (death)
- *Suffered* - indication of what's wrong with the world
- Historical marker - locates the story of Jesus in real space and time
- Perhaps indicative of what the world does with Jesus (washing hands) vs. Mary (“Let it be with me as you have said.”)



Why did Jesus die?

Theological Reasons

- Why did Jesus die *in this way*?
- There are many other examples of martyrs, but we don't symbolize them by their mode of execution
- "The death of Jesus is different because the *how* is of unique importance." - Fleming Rutledge

He was *crucified*...

The “*servile supplicium*”

- The Roman world ran on slavery and lived in constant fear of slave revolts
- Crucifixion was a capital punishment reserved for slaves and the worst criminals (non-citizens), especially those who had committed crimes against the state
- For Jews, crucifixion equated with a curse (Deuteronomy 21:22-23) - the person crucified was considered to be in a godless state
- In the first century world there was no lower form of death—public, humiliating, accursed.
- In being crucified, there is no person with whom Jesus cannot identify in life and in death

The Centrality of Christ's Death

The historical event becomes THE theological event

- Christ died “according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3)
- The Messiah, the representative of Israel, who was also the representative of humanity (“truly human”), enters into the depth of the human condition under sin
- In the incarnation, he becomes as a slave and dies a slave's death (Philippians 2:5-11)
- On the cross, the Son of God thus entered into solidarity with the lowest and least of all his creation, the nameless and forgotten, “the offscouring of all things” (1 Corinthians 4:13)
- Jesus was crucified because no other mode of execution would have been commensurate with the extremity of humanity's condition under sin.

“Jesus’ situation under the harsh judgment of Rome was analogous to our situation under Sin. He was condemned; he was rendered helpless and powerless; he was stripped of his humanity; he was reduced to the status of a beast, declared unfit to live and deserving of a death proper to slaves – and what, according to Paul, were we if not slaves?”

Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*

Sin as Slavery

- Sin is a *verb* - something people perform or engage in, but...
- Sin is also a *dominion* under which humanity exists
- It is so inclusive that there is “no one righteous, no not one” (Romans 3:10)
- Sin and Death have the character of universal forces from which no one escapes

**For we know that the law is spiritual; but I
am of the flesh, *sold into slavery under
sin.***

Romans 7:14 (emphasis added)

“Very truly I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the Son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

John 8:34-35

The Meaning of Jesus' Death

“Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.”

- In Jesus, God becomes human, taking the form of a slave in order to save people enslaved by sin and death
- In Jesus, the Creator God gives himself over to the enemy—Sin, and to its greatest weapon—Death.
- Jesus was crucified because no other form of execution would have been commensurate with the extremity of our status as slaves under Sin.
- In Jesus, God takes on our Godless state in order to set us free from Sin and Death.

Atonement Theories

How does Jesus' death save us?

- Moral Influence Theory - Jesus died to bring about positive change in humanity
- Ransom Theory - Jesus' death buys back humanity from Satan
- Christus Victor - Jesus dies to defeat the powers of evil, sin, and death and free humankind
- Satisfaction Theory - Jesus' death satisfies God's wrath against sinful humanity
- Penal Substitutionary Theory - Jesus is punished (penal) in place of sinners (substitutionary) to satisfy the wrath of God

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:21

Jesus' Death and Resurrection as the Climactic Event in Scripture

The whole Bible points to this moment...

- The story of the Bible is the story of how the Creator God rescues his people from slavery to Sin and Death so that they might be renewed in his image and reengage their vocation as a royal priesthood
- The story of the Bible is the story of God's covenant to bring his rescue plan to reality through Israel and through Israel's representative, their Messiah and King
- On the cross, God's representative and humanity's representative died a slave's death to take on the punishment humans deserve as slaves to Sin and Death
- When we give our allegiance and worship to the crucified King, we are released from slavery to Sin and Death—the powers he defeated on the cross and in the resurrection
- We begin to become the people we were created to be—both now and in the future.

“He suffered death and was buried”

Jesus really died

- It was not only an appearance of death (Docetism)
- Jesus suffered the same death that all humans suffer
- He was buried in a borrowed tomb
- That Jesus was truly dead and buried means that his resurrection from the dead is not just a spiritual resurrection, but a bodily one.
- “Descended to the dead” or “descended into hell?”

He Descended to the Dead

“He descended into Hell...”

- What happened between Jesus’ death on the cross and the resurrection?
- The early church understood these as one continuous event
- Some interpretations:
 - It merely means that Jesus went to the grave, where the dead go (reinforcing “died and was buried”)
 - Jesus proclaimed the gospel to the dead awaiting their full deliverance (1 Peter 3:18-20)
 - It expresses Jesus’ victory over Satan and Evil (“The Harrowing of Hell”)
 - It unites Jesus with saints in his glorious ascension (Colossians 2:15)

The Resurrection of Jesus

The bodily resurrection of the incarnate Christ

- **Articles of Religion (Article III)** - Christ did truly rise from the dead, and took again in body, with all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature...
- The resurrection of Jesus was NOT:
 - A resuscitation
 - A metaphor
 - A “spiritual” event
- The Christian proclamation is that Jesus Christ rose bodily from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion. It is a historical claim, not merely a metaphysical or metaphorical one.

Why the Resurrection Matters

The central proclamation of the Church

- It is the public demonstration of God's victory over Sin, Death, and Hell
- It is the vindication of all that Jesus said and did
- We become part of his victory through faith, through dying and being raised with Christ in baptism
- It is the guarantee and prototype of our future bodily resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20) - "We believe in the resurrection of the body"
- It affirms the goodness of God's creation and the human body, and points to the ultimate renewal of both

Salvation Means Creation Healed

God and sinners reconciled!

- What salvation means for human beings:
 - Humans saved from slavery to Sin and Death and their effects, and are restored to their God-given identity and vocation
- What salvation means for Creation:
 - Creation restored as God's Temple, God's dwelling place (Revelation 21, Romans 8)

He Ascended into Heaven

Seated at the right hand of the Father

- The death and resurrection of Jesus are the accomplishment of his mission as both Son of God and Son of Man (Daniel 7)
- He ascends in his resurrection body to take his place at the right hand of the Father (not a lower place, but an equal place)
- He is alive and reigns over earth and heaven
- He will return to make the rule complete, bringing heaven and earth together, and setting things right through his righteous judgment (“He will come again to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end”)
- He intercedes for us as our High Priest (Hebrews 10:11-14)

Judgment

The return of Jesus

- Romans 14:10, Romans 2:16
- Judgment day will reveal and make known all sins
- Judgment day will reveal the faith of the Church
- Righteous rewards will be granted to the people of God
- The enemies of God will receive their just punishment
- God sets the world right

“God’s justice is a saving, healing, restorative justice, because the God to whom justice belongs is the Creator God who has yet to complete his original plan for creation and who justice is designed not simply to restore balance to a world out of kilter but to bring to glorious completion and fruition the creation, teeming with life and possibility, that he made in the first place...”

N.T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*

Summary Thoughts

The Central Confession of Christian Faith

- Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension are the central events of the Christian faith
- They are events grounded in history, not merely in imagination and metaphor
- “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.” (1 Corinthians 15:17)
- The early church worshipped a crucified, resurrected, and ascended Lord and refused to give up that worship even when they were persecuted by both Jews and Gentiles for whom that worship made no sense
- In Jesus Christ, God took on the forces of Sin and Death by becoming both fully divine and fully human. He delivered us from slavery and freed us to become the people we were created to be.

“Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.”

C.S. Lewis