

The Passion of Christ

[He] Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried: he descended into hell ...

It is striking that the Apostles' Creed goes straight from Christ's birth at Bethlehem to his death at Calvary thirty-three years later, giving no mention of the remarkable life which he lived in-between. In doing this, the creed is squarely in line with Scripture, for the stress of Scripture is not on Christ's life but his death. In the Bible, all roads lead to the cross of Calvary, for it was at Calvary that Christ actually procured the eternal salvation of his people. The sinner's salvation is gained, not so much from Christ's living, teaching, miracles or example, but from his dying.

The cross of Calvary—that is, Christ's finished work of redemption—lies at the centre of the centre of the Christian faith and the heart of the heart of the biblical revelation. The cross of Christ is prefigured and prophesied in the Old Testament, described in the Gospels—the four Gospels have, in fact, been described as four Passion narratives with extended introductions—preached in Acts and explained in the epistles. It is the cross of Christ which is depicted visually in the Christian sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. And it is the cross of Christ which is the sum and substance of the Christian gospel: 'we preach Christ crucified' (1 Cor. 1:23). The aim of Christian evangelism is, under God, to bring sinners to the foot of the cross and to trust in the One who there gave his life as an atoning sacrifice for sinners.

The cross of Christ, therefore, could not be more central or crucial to the Christian faith. There is no salvation which by-passes the cross. The redeemed in heaven continue to extol the glories of the cross and the worth and wonder of the Crucified: 'You are worthy ... for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood' (Rev. 5:9). Hence the Apostles' Creed has good, scriptural warrant for moving straight from Christ's cradle to his cross—his incarnation to his immolation, his first breath to his redeeming blood, from Bethlehem to Calvary.

Chapter 4

We may not know, we cannot tell,
What pains He had to bear,
But we believe it was for us
He hung and suffered there.

He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven,
Saved by His precious blood.

(Cecil Frances Alexander,
'There is a Green Hill Far Away', 1848)

Unpacking this very compact line, we note first of all that Christ:

Suffered under Pontius Pilate

This places Christ's death firmly at a particular point in world history, for Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor—or Procurator—of Judea from AD 26–37. The Christian faith is based on historical fact, not cleverly invented fiction. It was Pontius Pilate who gave the final consent that Jesus should be crucified. The Jewish crowd bayed for Jesus's blood—aided and abetted by the Jewish authorities. Yet the Jewish leaders in Roman times had no authority to inflict the death penalty. This was vested in Rome, with Pontius Pilate as its local figurehead. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent of all the charges laid against him, yet he feared the crowd. Afraid that there would be a riot that would cause him to lose his governorship, 'Pilate ... took water and washed his hands before the multitude ... and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified' (Matt. 27:24, 26).

It is thus true to say that, while the factors and 'players' which caused Jesus's death were many and complex—they included the plan of God, the sin of the world, Judas Iscariot, the Jewish authorities and the Roman soldiers—Jesus could not, and would not, have been crucified were it not for the action and assent of Pontius Pilate. He 'suffered under Pontius Pilate'. Under the sovereignty of God, Pilate condemned Jesus to death so that we might know 'no condemnation' (Rom. 8:1).

As an interesting aside, we also note that Pontius Pilate had an official

residence in Caesarea on the coast, as well as in Jerusalem. The headquarters of the Roman garrison was located in Caesarea. In 1961, a stone slab bearing Pontius Pilate's name was discovered at Caesarea, confirming the historicity of the inspired Gospel records.

Next we note that Christ ...

Was crucified

Crucifixion was a cruel and barbaric form of capital punishment invented by the Romans. It entailed the victim being nailed to a plank of wood and hung up to die a long, lingering death by asphyxiation. Crucifixion was always carried out in a prominent, public place. The idea was that it would act as a deterrent to crime. Crucifixion was thus a most horrible mix of both personal excruciation and public humiliation. The emphasis of the Bible, however, is on the spiritual suffering of Christ at Calvary, not on his physical suffering—enormous though the latter undoubtedly was.

Old Testament law stated, 'If a man has committed a sin deserving of death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day ... for he who is hanged is accursed of God' (Deut. 21:22–23). Paul gives a 'Christological amplification' of this key verse in Galatians 3:13, taking us to the heart of the meaning of Christ's crucifixion: 'Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree").' Paul is saying that at Calvary, Christ was cursed by God so that we might be blessed. He was judged for our sins so that the judgement we deserve for our sins might be removed. He was punished by God so that we might be pardoned by God. At Calvary, God's judgement and mercy met, for Calvary enables God both to condemn sin and pardon the sinner. Christ's death at Calvary was thus a *substitutionary* death. He died in the place of sinners: '... [Christ] who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree' (1 Peter 2:24); 'He was wounded for our transgressions' (Isa. 53:5); '... who was delivered up because of our offenses' (Rom. 4:25).

Chapter 4

O Love divine! What has Thou done?
The immortal God hath died for me!
The Father's co-eternal Son
Bore all my sins upon the tree.
The immortal God for me hath died;
My Lord, my Love, is crucified!

Is crucified for me and you,
To bring us rebels back to God.
Believe, believe the record true,
Ye now are bought with Jesus' blood.
Pardon for sin flows from His side:
My Lord, my Love, is crucified.

(Charles Wesley, 1707–1788)

Was ... dead

There is no doubt that at Calvary Jesus really died. He was 'obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross' (Phil. 2:8). Jesus himself viewed his death at Calvary as his main reason for coming to earth. In Mark 10:45, for instance, he explained, '... the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.' John's vivid eyewitness account of Christ's death records Christ taking a drink of vinegar to quench his raging thirst and then exclaiming the triumphant words of an accomplished redemption: 'when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit' (John 19:30). He 'was crucified, *dead* and buried'.

THE NATURE OF DEATH

According to the Bible, death has both physical and spiritual facets to it. Scripture teaches that death is God's punishment for sin. 'The soul who sins shall die' (Ezek. 18:20); 'the wages of sin is death' (Rom. 6:23). Death, in the Bible, is actually threefold. It refers to:

- the separation of the soul from the body
- the separation of the soul from God
- eternal separation from God in hell—'the second death' (Rev. 2:11).

Biblically, therefore, death is both physical and spiritual, and at

Calvary, Christ experienced both physical and spiritual death. Bearing the sins of others, he was separated from God the Father and so cried out, ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’ (Matt. 27:46). He died to save his people from spiritual death—the fearful reality termed ‘the second death’ (Rev. 2:11).

Spiritual death, that is, separation from God, means being separated from the source of all life, light and love. It is the ultimate alienation from which the gospel of reconciliation redeems the lost sinner. The gospel proclaims, ‘Christ died for our sins’ (1 Cor. 15:3). He died to deal with the sin-barrier which separates us from God, so that by believing in him, we are reconciled to God for time and eternity. In 1 Peter 3:18 we find a succinct explanation of the gospel and its blessed benefits when it states, ‘Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God.’

Paradoxically, Christ’s death is a death which saves the believing sinner from death. Christ’s death has wrought the death of death! ‘The sting of death is sin’ (1 Cor. 15:56). But in dealing with our sin at Calvary, Christ has taken away the sting of death for all whose faith is in him. Death, for the Christian, is not to be feared. Because of the death of Christ at Calvary, death, for the Christian, will be the porter which ushers us into the nearer presence of God! John Calvin wrote, ‘He [Christ] died in order, by His death, to conquer the death which threatened us, and to swallow it up—that death which otherwise would have swallowed and devoured us all.’¹

Christ’s death, therefore, was a saving death. Christ’s death was the very reason for his incarnation. Immortal deity cannot die, hence Christ took upon himself our mortal flesh so that he could die and pay the price for our sins, deliver us from the sting of death, and bestow upon us eternal life. He died that we might live! ‘For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Rom. 6:23). It is small wonder, then, that the death of Christ is the theme of ten thousand Christian hymns.

We sing the praise of Him who died,
Of Him who died upon the cross;
The sinner’s hope let men deride;
For this we count the world but loss.

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Inscribed upon the cross we see
In shining letters, ‘God is love’:
He bears our sins upon the tree:
He brings us mercy from above.

(Thomas Kelly, 1815)

Was ... buried

Jesus’s being ‘buried’ refers to his being laid lovingly in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea after his crucifixion. Matthew records how Joseph, after having attained Pilate’s consent, took the body of Jesus, ‘wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his new tomb which he had hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb, and departed’ (Matt. 27:59–60). John’s Gospel adds a further detail, telling us that Joseph was assisted by Nicodemus the Pharisee in tenderly preparing Jesus’s body for burial—binding it with linen cloths and spices ‘as the custom of the Jews is to bury’ (John 19:40).

Jesus, then, was ‘buried’. Technically, he was not so much buried as entombed. The reference to his burial in the Apostles’ Creed is there to attest to the reality of his death—he really did die and pay the penalty for our sins in full—and the reality of his resurrection. The same body that was placed in Joseph’s tomb also vacated that tomb. The empty tomb and undisturbed grave-clothes are part of the cumulative evidence for Christ’s resurrection. The burial of Christ is thus the bridge between Christ’s atoning death and his victorious resurrection. John Calvin brings out the spiritual significance of Christ’s burial when he says, ‘He [Christ] was buried so that we, united to Him by the active power of His death, might be buried with our sin and delivered from the power of the devil and death.’²

He descended into hell

We come here to the most solemn and sobering words of the Apostles’ Creed—yet they are also words which take us to the heart of the gospel and the meaning of the cross of Christ. Hell, of course, is not a popular subject, and there are many who wish to go in the face of the Bible and deny its reality. Some have purported that Christ’s ‘descent into hell’ in this line is merely a synonym for his burial. This, though, is not the case. If it were, it

would not have been included in the Apostles' Creed. The Apostles' Creed is characterized by brevity and succinctness, and it contains no superfluous lines. In a nutshell, this line concerning Christ's descent into hell is teaching us that, when Christ died at Calvary, he actually tasted hell, that we might go at last to heaven.

WHAT IS HELL?

Hell is the place of the eternally damned. Hell is the ultimate in God's judgement against sin. Hell entails being eternally banished from the blessedness of God's presence. Jesus described hell as 'the outer darkness' (Matt. 25:30)—away from the light of God.

Did Jesus really experience hell at Calvary, when he bore our sins and God's judgement upon them? Did he really 'descend into hell'? Yes. He tasted the outer darkness to save us from it. He tasted the outer darkness so that we might bask in God's eternal light. When he died, 'from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land' (Matt. 27:45).

Did Jesus really experience hell at Calvary? Was he really separated from God and banished from his blessed presence? Yes. Sin and God can have nothing to do with each other, and at Calvary, Jesus bore our sins and God's just judgement upon them, hence 'about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"' (Matt. 27:46).

At Calvary, Jesus did indeed descend into hell. He endured the darkness to save us from hell's outer darkness. He was divinely punished to procure our divine pardon. He endured divine retribution to gain our divine redemption. He was separated from his Father so that we might be reconciled to God the Father. He experienced hell, so that through faith in him, we might go at last to heaven, saved by his substitutionary sacrifice—'saved by His precious blood' (Alexander, 'There is a Green Hill').

Here is the heart of the Christian gospel. Jesus saves from death and hell. Here is the true meaning of Calvary. He 'was crucified, dead and buried: he descended into hell'. It is truly awful, and yet it is truly wonderful, for his pains have procured our eternal salvation if our faith is in him.

Chapter 4

The Holy One did hide His face;
O Christ, 'twas hid from Thee!
Dumb darkness wrapped Thy soul a space,
The darkness due to me.
But now that face of radiant grace
Shines forth in light on me.

Jehovah bade His sword awake;
O Christ, it woke 'gainst Thee!
Thy blood the flaming blade must slake,
Thy heart its sheath must be;
All for my sake, my peace to make,
Now sleeps that sword for me.

(Anne R. Cousin, 1824–1906,
'O Christ, What Burdens Bowed Thy Head!')

Notes

- 1 Calvin, *Truth for all Time*, p. 40.
- 2 Ibid.