

A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE APOSTLES' CREED -- 5.

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**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.

“He descended into hell;”

The fifth segment or phrase of the Apostles' Creed deals with what happened in the short period of time between Christ's death on the cross — the event we call His “Passion” and remember on Good Friday — and His return to earth after that death — the event we call His “Resurrection” and remember on Easter Sunday.

This term of the Creed's is the one place in the Church's basic statements that affirms that there really is a hell and that

Christians, as part of the essentials of their faith, believe in the reality of that hell. This is not a popular teaching in today's society; most people much prefer to believe that their actions will have no consequences at all, let alone any bad consequences. Unfortunately for them, that is not what Christianity teaches. Instead, Christianity teaches that our acts *do* have consequences, that we are *responsible* for the choices we make in this life here on earth,¹ and that lives that have been lived in opposition to God's will and commandments come finally to very uncomfortable and undesirable ends.

Traditionally, Christianity has summarized this understanding by what it calls "the Four Last Things". These are "last" in time, that is, they are the last things that can happen in any one person's life: death, judgement, heaven, and hell. As we are told in the seventh portion of the Creed, which will be discussed later, this *judgement* is the point at which each person must give an account to Christ² of his life and of all that he has done during it, for good or ill. Christ will then judge that person and his earthly doings and then, on the basis of that judgement, assign him his appropriate eternal reward, *i.e.*, heaven or hell.

What do we know about the nature of this hell? Is it, as some people picture it, a place of fire, of torture, or of torment? Those attributes of hell have been common beliefs for millennia and have frequently been depicted in art, in story, and in proverbial phrases.³ However, all that the Church tells us for certain is that this hell is "The place of departed spirits".⁴ Because Christ went *from* this "place" *to* "heaven", this place called hell is clearly not heaven, but somewhere different. Further, because Christ in heaven "sitteth on the right hand of God", we know heaven is the place where people are in close fellowship with God, so by clear implication hell is the place where people are emphatically *not* in fellowship with God.

In fact, some theologians have suggested that the essence of hell, the thing that makes it so horrible that it absolutely must be avoided, is not physical torture but simply the state

mysteries of creation to which we have no certain answers although many people have speculated about it.

² “From thence he [Christ] shall come to judge the quick and the dead.”

³ One rather general reference to “unquenchable fire” as punishment is reported at St. Matt. 3:12 and St. Luke 3:17, and another somewhat more direct reference to it as “hell fire” is recorded at St. Matt. 25:41 and St. Mark 9:43-49. However, in the contexts of these remarks, they may well have been intended more to indicate in a vivid image the overall unpleasantness of eternal punishment than to convey precise information about the mechanism for inflicting that unpleasantness. What we can be certain about is that Hell involves complete separation from God.

⁴ The “rubric” or service direction at the beginning of the Apostle’s Creed says, “*And any Churches may, instead of the words, He descended into hell, use the words, He went into the place of departed spirits, which are considered as words of the same meaning in the Creed.*” THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 15 and 29 (PECUSA 1928).

⁵ An old time New Orleans lawyer, the father of one of my former partners, used to tell clients who said they “wanted justice” that most people, if they thought honestly about their situations, would much prefer receiving mercy rather than actual justice.

⁶ Ephesians 4:8-10 (KJV).

⁷ THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 71 (PECUSA 1928) (emphasis supplied).

⁸ St. Matthew 26:6-7; St. Mark 16:6-7; St. Luke 24:5-6; St. John 20:12-13.

⁹ St. Matthew 17:22-23 and 27:63; St. Mark 8:31.

¹⁰ Isaiah 53.

¹¹ St. Matthew 28:11-15.

¹² There are several occasions recorded in both the Old and New Testaments on which prophets or apostles returned the dead to life as evidence not of their own divine *natures*, for they remained merely human, but of their divine *mission*. See, e.g., 1 Kings 17:17-22 (Elijah); 2 Kings 4:18-37 (Elisha); Acts 9:36-41 (Peter).

¹³ This was shown by the fact that His body, as the apostles and disciples saw it after His Resurrection, bore the marks of His crucifixion and death. St. Luke 24:39-40; St. John 20:19-20 & 20:27.

¹⁴ On the day of Pentecost, Acts 2.

of being cut off from God for all eternity. While we are here on earth we have some opportunities for contact with God, even in our fallen and imperfect condition, but those in hell have no such chance at all.

Christ Himself lived without ever committing any sin, and He is the judge of those who die. Clearly, however, He did not judge Himself. Why, then, did He spend these three days in hell? The Church gives two traditional answers to this. Firstly, He went down to hell so that He would have experienced the totality of human life, from birth, through death, to *both* possible ends after death: first He spent this short time in hell, then He spends eternity in heaven.

Secondly, it is sometimes suggested, during this time in hell Christ preached to the departed spirits there. These were some of the people who had died before His earthly ministry took place so had never had the chance to hear His saving message from His own lips. As a result, these particular souls had failed the test of judgement after death and had been rewarded with eternal separation from God. Because that failure was in part the result of their having lived before God sent Christ to earth in human form, however, Christ took pity on them and extended to them a second chance to hear His message and repent. Thus we know that Christ’s judgement on the departed is not only wholly *just* but is also *merciful*.⁵

“...The third day he rose again from the dead...”

The last part of this segment of the Creed tells us that, after descending into hell, Christ rose again from the dead. The first Christians knew this because they themselves had seen Him after His death on the Cross and His burial in the garden tomb. They recorded this knowledge in some of their earliest writings, and explicitly linked His rising from the dead with His later Ascension into Heaven:

When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that he

ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.)⁶

People sometimes ask, “Why do we celebrate Easter only two days after Good Friday?” The answer is that the ancient Jews counted the day on which an event happened as the “first day”. Thus if one counts Good Friday, the day of Christ’s death, as the first day, the “third day” was Easter Sunday.

One of the differences between this Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed that we recite in the Mass is that here the latter expands this phrase to say “And the third day he rose again *according to the Scriptures*”.⁷ This additional phrase has two separate meanings that help explain the importance of this article of the Creed. For one, “*according to the Scriptures*” means the same thing as though it had been phrased “*as the Scriptures tell us*” or “*according to the witness of the Scriptures*”. That is, we can, and should, believe that Christ rose from the dead precisely because the Scriptures tell us that He did so.⁸

The second meaning of this extra phrase is the same as if it had been worded, “*in fulfillment of the Scriptures*”. During what is sometimes called Christ’s “Galilean Ministry”, He warned His followers that He would be betrayed and put to death and that He would then rise from the dead.⁹ Thus His rising fulfilled the forecast He Himself had made.

More than that, however, His foretelling of His own death was directly connected with some prophecies in the Old Testament. Isaiah, in particular, told the Israelites that there would come “a man of sorrows” who would be despised, rejected, and killed, and would bear our sins for us.¹⁰ This “bearing our sins” is, of course, a reference to the Atonement and to our salvation.

This is precisely what the early Church understood Christ to have done for us. Thus His death was in fulfillment of this

part of the Hebrew Scriptures. His own Galilean prophecy to His followers in part merely repeated Isaiah’s prophecy and showed that He was the “man of sorrows” of whom Isaiah wrote. In part, however, it expanded on that prophecy by showing *how* He would bring us salvation or freedom from our sins. His rising from the dead was an integral part of this process of salvation or freeing.

Returning now to the Apostle’s Creed itself, Christ did not go directly from His short stay in hell to His eternal one in heaven; in between, He stopped for a second period on earth. It has rightly been said that it was not the absence of Christ’s body from the garden tomb that proved that He was divine; if that missing body had been all there was, then His enemies could have been right when they claimed that the disciples stole His body away and hid it.¹¹

Instead, it is Christ’s *resurrection*, His returning in His original body from death to visible and palpable life here on earth, that is the final proof of His divine nature. Only a special act of God could overcome death, as when Christ Himself had raised Lazarus from the dead. However, just raising a dead person back to life would not necessarily have meant that the one reviving the corpse was divine, it would only have meant that he was carrying out God’s special command.¹² Thus Christ’s own clearly demonstrated victory over death, without any prophet or apostle’s interceding on His behalf, was the proof of His divinity.

Also, the period between Christ’s Resurrection and His Ascension, in which he appeared to the apostles and disciples in His original body,¹³ was the time in which Christ imparted His final teaching to those who would shortly¹⁴ form His Church, thus preparing them for their new mission to the world.

¹ We call this “free will”, which means that we are free to choose to do that which God wishes us to do, to do that which is right, and that we are also free to choose to do that which God wishes us not to do, to do that which is wrong. Why He chose to give us this freedom to disobey Him is one of the