

HE DESCENDED TO THE DEAD
THIRD IN SERIES ON THE APOSTLES' CREED
I PETER 3:18-22 LUKE 15:11-32
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adjectives--are built upon the verb. For the Greek, on the other hand, the elemental unit is the noun. In the beginning was the noun, and all other parts of speech depend on it. The Hebrew thinks in terms of acts, deeds, works. The Greek thinks in terms of essences, substances. This one fundamental difference is extraordinarily important; its results are stupendously far-reaching. It has affected everything that the Hebrew or the Greek has thought and believed. The Hebrew begins with God "in action," a living, doing God. The Hebrew asks "What has God done?" ...The Greek would have to begin, not by defining what God did or does, but rather by defining who or what God is! What is his nature? his essence?

Kallas further points out that the Greek view of substance opened the door to modern science (pg. 37). Substances obey rules. The Greeks believed in consistency. The Hebrew, on the other hand, looked at life, rather than abstract ideas, and saw that life is full of inconsistency. That is why the Hebrew was not a scientist, because he believed in a living God who is not bound by unalterable rules. God is not only outside the rules, but God acts outside the rules!

There was much controversy in those early centuries when the church tried to define Jesus in Greek terms. There were those called gnostics who believed Jesus could not have been a human because the body is evil and only the soul is pure, a commonly accepted Greek idea. They believed Jesus was divine and only "appeared" to be a human. Jesus was a manifestation who was beyond earthly things. The Bible did not address such concepts for they were foreign to Hebrew thinking. The Nicene Creed, written in the fourth century, sought to define in Greek terms how Jesus was truly human and truly divine, both God and man. The Nicene Creed says that the Lord Jesus Christ is "very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father." Read the creed sometime, #739 in the hymnal. Essentially, it didn't make any sense then, and it doesn't make any sense now!

The Apostles' Creed is a little more helpful. It was compiled in its basic form in the middle of the second century, and was directed to those who denied that Jesus was a real person. Because it is an earlier creed than the Nicene, it still retains some of the Hebrew thinking. The roots of the Apostles' Creed go back to the apostles, and the nature of Jesus is spelled out in verbs: conceived, born, suffered, crucified, died, buried, descended, rose, ascended, seated, will come again. The intent of these verbs is to refute those who denied the humanity of Jesus. Jesus was a real, live human being. He did not just "appear" to be human. He was a human.

To the gnostics who believed that the pure soul was imprisoned in an evil body, it was inconceivable that God could participate in the human struggle. It was inconceivable that God could suffer and endure pain; but, the creed says Jesus suffered. It was inconceivable to the gnostics that God could die, could endure the humiliation of death; but, the creed affirms that Jesus not only died, but endured the humiliation of crucifixion, and, furthermore, he was buried. It was inconceivable to the gnostics that the evil body could be resurrected; but the creed affirms that the human, dead Jesus rose again.

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What is special about Christianity? What makes Christianity unique, distinct from other religions, including that contemporary American religion--humanism? Truth, goodness, and beauty are sought by Christians, but they are also sought by participants in other belief systems. A Christian has genuine conviction, sincere faith, exemplary ethics and good will, but so do many other people. A church organizes meditation and prayer groups, engages in social action, and promotes good works, but so do other organizations and religions. What is special about Christianity?

Hans Küng, a contemporary German Catholic theologian, answers in his classic, On Being a Christian, pg. 123,

The special feature of Christianity...is Jesus himself, who is known even today by the ancient name of "Christ." None of the other religions, great or small, however much they may occasionally venerate him even in temple or in their holy book, would regard him as ultimately decisive, definitive, archetypal for man's relations with God, with his fellow man, with society. The special feature, the most fundamental characteristic of Christianity is that it considers Jesus as ultimately decisive, definitive, archetypal.

Who is Jesus? Jesus is the distinctive feature of our religion. Jesus is our archetype or model, our norm, our authority, the apex of our faith; but who is he? What is his nature? Several months ago I preached a series of sermons in search of the "real" Jesus, in which I attempted to place Jesus in his historical setting. But, theologically, who is Jesus? We turn to the creeds for help. Last week I pointed out that the major part of the Apostles' Creed is devoted to Jesus; and, indeed, Jesus was the reason for the creed. Defining the nature of Jesus was a major struggle in the early centuries of the church.

When Peter and Paul began taking the faith to the gentiles--to the Greeks and Romans--it was necessary to develop a theology that was intelligible to the Greek mind. The Greek world view was different from the Hebrew. How Greeks thought was different from the Jews. The topics which interested Greek philosophers were different from the topics addressed by the Bible. So, it was necessary to present Jesus and the Christian faith in terms that were understandable to the Greeks. And, therein was the theological problem which is not yet resolved. It was very difficult for the Greeks to think like the Jews of the Bible. And, it is still difficult, for we are more Greek than we are Jewish. The major reason that the Bible is so little understood, and so widely misinterpreted, is that we Americans apply Greek thinking to a Hebrew Bible and it doesn't work.

For example, there is a fundamental difference in the language itself. James Kallas, in his book, A Layman's Introduction to Christian Thought, explains the difference this way, pgs. 34-35,

The basic building block of the Hebrew language is the verb...All the other parts of speech--nouns, pronouns,

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It was inconceivable to the gnostics that God could be born, that God could come into this world through the evil sex act, be born of a woman (and women were considered less than good because they gave birth), and be a baby who cries and wets his pants; but the creed affirms that Jesus was conceived and born. We get hung up because of our Greek, scientific mind, on the virgin birth. The controversial word of the creed in its day was not the "virgin" but "born." The creed affirms that Jesus was born and that the Holy Spirit was involved in that birth. The virgin birth as such was not considered an essential belief in those early centuries. It is not mentioned in Mark, John or any of Paul's letters. What was considered critical is the belief that Jesus was born!

Who Jesus is was not addressed by the Bible, for the Jews, with the emphasis on verbs, were far more interested in what Jesus did. Here we find the essence of the Christian faith. We believe Jesus reveals God to us in a special, unique, decisive way. We believe Jesus reveals God's will for humankind. We believe Jesus is both the message and the model of God's kingdom, of God's vision for humankind. The purpose God had and has in creation is modeled by Jesus. It is through Jesus we see the kingdom, and it is through Jesus we enter the kingdom. Jesus is the means by which we receive God's love, enter into that kingdom, and are empowered to live as Jesus taught and modeled.

There are many articles in the creed which deserve our attention and, as many sermons have been preached on most of them, I would like to discuss in further detail the article which was omitted from the Methodist version of the Apostles' Creed, but retained in the ecumenical version which we are now using. The phrase reads, "He descended to the dead," or, in its former wording, "He descended to hell." It was omitted in the Methodist version, and I am not sure if the reason was theological or historical. Historically, the phrase was added to the Apostles' Creed some two hundred years later.

There is only one biblical passage that says Jesus, after his death, went to wherever the dead are located. In the Old Testament, it was believed that the dead went to a shadowy place called "sheol," translated in older versions as "hell." I Peter 3:19 states that Jesus in his spiritual existence went and preached to the imprisoned spirits, particularly those who lived in the days of Noah. "He descended to the dead," in mythological terms, is celebrating the tremendous love of God who offers the good news of salvation, the good news of the kingdom of God, to those who lived before Jesus, to those who live outside the faith community. The question is often asked, "What about the salvation of those who lived before Jesus?" The answer is that salvation is offered to them as well, because Jesus preached to the dead. The question is often asked, "What about those who have never heard the gospel?" The answer is that God is not limited by the confines of the physical church. God even goes outside.

What Jesus did and does is to reveal the tremendous love of God who desires that everyone might be saved, reunited with him in the original purpose of creation, and live in the kingdom of God. God will go to any lengths to love you and reach you; any lengths, even visiting the place of the dead. Jesus told a parable to demonstrate God's love. There was a father with two sons. The younger son asked for his inheritance, went off to a far

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country, had a grand time squandering it, and ended up eating with pigs, destitute, hopeless and lost. He decided to go home and seek his father's forgiveness and reinstatement to the family. No doubt he was frightened, apprehensive and worried. But, he didn't realize the extent of his father's love.

We have misnamed this parable, for it is not about the prodigal son, but rather about the father's redeeming love. According to the story, who was waiting for the son's return, no doubt standing at the door many times during the day, watching the road? Who saw the other first? Who ran to the other? Who embraced the wandering son? Who kissed him? Who gave a party? The father, out of joy over the return of his son! God waits for all humankind, and at the first sign of readiness, rushes to us, hugs us, kisses us and throws a party.

But, the story is not over. There was another son, the elder. He was the good boy. He was the righteous one, the good citizen, the church member. He was upset that his father would give a party for that no-good brother. He pouted, sulked and would not go into the party. So, who left the party and went out to him? Yes, the father. He went out and begged the elder son to come in and join the party. "But, father," he cried, "I have worked for you all these years. I have been faithful. I have been good, and you never gave a party for me and my friends." "Son," replied the father, "You are always here with me, and everything I have is yours. But we are celebrating because your brother was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found." Did the elder brother go into the party? Did he overcome his jealousy and resentment and welcome his brother? We don't know, for the story ends. Make your own ending depending on your attitude and your experiences.

And, where is the father when the story ends? Outside the party, outside with the elder son! There is nowhere you can go where God will not go to meet you. There is nowhere so bad, nothing so wrong, nothing so evil you can do, that God will not rush to meet you and throw a party, or stay outside with you while you pout, feel superior, and make up your mind. Jesus will even go to hell--the furthest place you can imagine from God--for you, and for all humankind. That is what it means to believe that Jesus descended to the dead.

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