

## **The Death of God**

Mark 15:1-5, 22-26, 42-46

### ***Prayer for Illumination***

Thank you, Lord, for the riches of your word. Be with us in this hour, that we may profit from this scripture. Enlighten our minds that we may understand, soften our hearts that we may respond, and direct our wills that we may obey Your word. In Christ we pray, Amen.

### ***Cur Deus Homo***

The importance of Jesus is not one of the questions which reasonable people debate. Everyone admits that no one has affected the course of history like Jesus. But who He is, and what He did is widely debated. And who Jesus is, is the most important question in all history, and is the most important question you will ever face.

This semester Eddie is preaching through the Apostles Creed. Two weeks ago you considered the phrase, “and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord.” In this phrase we confess that Jesus is the Son of God and Lord of all. Now there are many sons of God. This is a term which was used for Adam and his offspring, and especially for kings and emperors. Likewise many men have been lord of lands and peoples. But Jesus is unique. When we confess that Jesus is the only Son of God, we are claiming that He is a different kind of Son than any mortal. In this creed we are confessing that Jesus is the divine Son, and that His lordship is a divine lordship. We are claiming that Jesus is God and has universal authority.

Last week you considered the next phrase, “who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary.” By this we confess that Jesus did not parachute out of heaven, but that He was conceived in the womb of a woman. Jesus began life on earth as a fertilized egg, grew into an infant, was born a child and grew up just like all human beings. Jesus was just as human as you and I. We are claiming that Jesus is a man – as much a man as any other man.

As the church grew and expanded, people began to think more deeply about the teachings of the apostles. The New Testament documents clearly show the deity of Jesus. They show equally the humanity of Jesus. So which is it? Is Jesus God, the uncreated creator? Or is Jesus man, a creature like other created beings? Is Jesus partly God and partly man? Is He God who became man, or a man who became God?

Many first and second century people were certain that Jesus was a man. They saw Him, or knew people who did. He lived in all respects like a man. In our day, most people are comfortable with the idea that Jesus of Galilee was an historical figure. Others were certain that Jesus was God. The old, practical gods of the Roman Republic had come into competition with mystical, extravagant gods from the east. These mystery religions featured spiritual experiences which bore similarities to Christianity. Then there was the dualism of the Greeks which posited that matter was inherently evil. These factors converged in the minds of many to think that the idea of the Savior being a man was repulsive. The church began to splinter into factions, each with its own concept of who Jesus is. The church wrestled energetically with these questions for several centuries until we finally resolved that Jesus is fully God and fully man. This may not satisfy your favorite logic system, but that is the only possible answer that is faithful to the scriptures.

The Apostles Creed is the shortest of all the creeds of the church, and it contains the bare essentials of the Christian faith. Why would it be so important that the deity and the humanity of Jesus be declared essential to Christianity? This is another deep question, which pastors and theologians pondered for centuries. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century Anselm of Canterbury gave a satisfactory answer by answering a related question. In his book *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Man) he asked, “How can one man pay the price for the sins of all men?” If someone is to pay for the sins of man, he must be a man. But if he is to pay for all sins, he must have infinite value – He must be God. So if one will pay for the sins of all people, he must

be both man and God – man to pay for human sin, and God to pay for all sins.

### ***Why a creed?***

And now we can see the vital *practical* importance of the creed. The articles of this creed are not merely theological curiosities, but are essential to salvation. If the Jesus in whom you believed were a man only, you would be lost in your sins. If Jesus were merely God, you would have no salvation. The only Jesus who is capable of saving you is the real, historical God-man – Jesus who was fully God and fully man. This is the only Jesus who is real and who saves us, and this is the Jesus that the creed presents. The creed helps us to avoid falling into disastrous errors which might cause us to think that we were saved when we were not. It also prevents us from preaching a false Jesus to others.

### ***Historical Suffering***

Now tonight we advance to the next phrase of the creed, “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell.” If some people thought that the Christ was a pure spirit without any pollution of the flesh, others thought that Jesus was a myth, a legend. Some variant of this view is popular today. Many people who refuse to believe the Bible’s teaching about Jesus, nevertheless claim to admire the moral qualities and the teaching of the figure found therein. They hold that what is important in Christianity is not the details of the events (which are too fantastic to believe), but the teaching and example of Jesus. He taught us to love each other and died for His friends. This, they say, is the essence of Christianity. This is the gospel, and nothing else really matters.

Scripture teaches otherwise. Other religions teach moral codes and techniques of salvation. Christianity alone is a religion that stands or falls on the historical veracity of its claims. Scripture reveals a God who created the world and remains involved in its operations. The moral principles found in scripture are expressions of the divine nature, and are revealed in the acts of God. We learn who God is, what He is like, and how we should behave by the acts He performs. If the events in scripture never happened, Christianity is a false religion. In that case we would be lying to each other and have no hope of eternal life.

It is not enough that the teachings of the New Testament are noble and inspiring. Noble teaching is indeed inspiring, but it will not rescue us from our sin, nor will it redeem a fallen world. What we need is a savior who can conquer evil and rescue the world from wickedness. That savior is Jesus of Galilee, the man born in Bethlehem, carried to Egypt, reared in Nazareth – who preached to thousands, cast out demons, and healed the sick – who was betrayed by a man named Judas, sentenced by Pilate, the Roman governor, and killed by his centurions. The creed anchors Jesus in history by referencing a widely famous political figure, Pontius Pilate. We know who this man was, when he lived, and what he did.

The story of Jesus is not a myth, a legend, a fairy tale. It is real history. The gospels are historical documents, reliable records of actual events, verifiable by other historical documents. Jesus was a real man, and his death was a historical fact. This is essential because our salvation depends not on Jesus’ life and teachings, but on the act of his suffering and death. If Jesus did not die, then Christianity is a sham. But Pontius Pilate is witness to the truth that Jesus did die. Pilate killed Him. And how did Pilate kill Jesus? In the most horrible way.

### ***Shameful Punishment***

These days we make an effort to execute people humanely, but the Romans strove to make execution as shocking as possible. As ancient empires go, the Romans were quite tolerant of local customs and religions. Each conquered people was free to conduct their affairs as they saw fit. What the Romans would not tolerate was insurrection. Any revolt was brutally put down, and the rebels were viciously punished as a warning to anyone stupid enough to contemplate rebellion. First they stripped their victim naked. Then

they flogged him with a scourge – a whip with metal pieces fixed on the end. The scourge tore open the flesh and exposed tissue and bones to further torment. Then the criminal was hung by his arms on a cross. This had the effect of very slowly suffocating him as the weight of his body crushed his organs and collapsed his lungs. Death might take a day or two, during which time citizens mocked the helpless victim and birds began to feed on his flesh.

Why? Why would even evil men do such a thing to other men? Is this not the most revolting practice you can imagine? Indeed, crucifixion was so revolting, it was illegal to put Roman citizens to death this way. But Jesus was not a citizen of Rome. He was a nobody in Rome's eyes, a criminal who had caused a revolt in Jerusalem. But why is it important for us to know and remember this detail? What value is it to us that Jesus died this way and not some other way? The value is that when He hung on the cross, Jesus was the worst of all men. As He took upon Himself the sins of all mankind, Jesus deserved the most violent death imaginable. The crucifixion was the physical manifestation of a spiritual punishment happening on the cross. For while the cross was tearing Jesus' body apart, His Heavenly Father was tearing apart His soul. A disgusting wretch, bearing the sins of all mankind – God can not tolerate such deep, black, revolting evil. The Father unleashed the pent-up anger for the sins of all people in all times and threw it on Jesus. Crucifixion was the only appropriate death for Him who took all our sins upon Himself.

### ***Complete Death***

Where were you on 9/11/2001? I was in the student center at Lehigh University when the television showed airplanes crashing into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. Striking how realistic they can make these disaster movies, isn't it? Look, it looks like real airplanes flying straight into the towers. Flames burst out, people plunge to their deaths, slowly the towers collapse. What? The announcer says this is real? It can't be. It's impossible. Nothing like this has ever happened. This is New York City. This is America. There, they are showing it again. And again. And again. Thousands killed, internet and cell service killed, whole blocks destroyed. This isn't a disaster movie. This is real life. A horrible reality. But no, I must be dreaming. It can't be real. But it is – and the world will never be the same.

On the day before Passover, 21 centuries ago – the impossible happened. God died. German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche made a name for himself in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by declaring that God had died. This declaration had a brief renaissance in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century among pseudo-intellectuals and magazines. But these philosophers and journalists missed the story by 2,000 years. God did die. He died on a cross by the order of Pontius Pilate in roughly 33 A.D. But that's impossible! How could God die? By definition, God, or a god – however you define Him – is immortal. No religion's god dies. But yes, the impossible did happen, and the world has never been the same since.

The crucifixion of Jesus is an historical fact which is hard to refute credibly. So the primary debate about Jesus moves on to the question of what happened next. The idea of God dying is so bizarre, so crazy, so impossible, that many people do not believe it. Those first and second century Greeks and mystics did not believe the Christ died, because they did not believe that he was a man. Muslims also do not believe that Jesus died. They find it unbelievable that God would allow His prophet to suffer such a shameful death. They teach that Jesus escaped at the last minute and that a substitute died on the cross in His place. But if Jesus did not die, we are still lost in our sins.

God had to die, if anyone is to live. From the beginning, on day one of man's creation, God was clear and simple. "Obey Me and you will live, disobey Me and you will die." The first man, Adam, disobeyed God, and every man and woman ever since has followed his example. All of us, even the best of us, disobey God, and are thus under a death sentence. You are studying Paul's letter to the Romans in your small group Bible studies this semester. Paul makes this point very emphatically. Everyone – hardened atheists, sexual

perverts, vicious criminals – even law-abiding Jews, pious Greeks, and noble savages – everyone breaks God’s law. Psalm 14 reverberates through Paul’s letter, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. (Romans 3:10-12) We are all under a death sentence. Death is the sure future of each person born on earth.

But also from the beginning – immediately after Adam’s first sin – God announced a rescue operation. God came to Adam and Eve, guilty as hell, cowering in the bushes, trying to escape God’s burning gaze – and He announced not judgment, but salvation. There would come a day in which a child born from a woman would save mankind from death. This hope encouraged Adam and Eve. This hope was passed down from generation to generation – that one day a child would be born who would rescue this miserable world from the horrors of sin. Now exactly *how* this would happen, no one knew. Not even the angels knew how God would rescue the human race. No one expected God to become man, and *no one* expected God to suffer like Jesus did. The humiliation of it! Conceived in a wet sticky womb, born a bloody mess – how degrading to depend on a woman to clean your poopy bottom, to learn how to walk and talk... The humiliation of being scorned and rejected by your own people when you preached the gospel, healed the sick, and cast out demons. And then the utter, utter, unbelievable humiliation of crucifixion. No one expected God to take upon Himself the sins of the whole world. No one expected God to pay the price of those sins. No one expected God to suffer the torment of hell so that wretched men and women might live. No one expected God to die.

But God did die. It was not a trick, a mirage, a substitution. The real god-man, Jesus of Galilee, died completely – and when He died, He took with Him the penalty for the sins of all mankind. When Jesus breathed His last breath, the death sentence on all those who believe in Him was lifted. The ancient people of God knew and trusted that God would save them somehow, and He did. We who are born after Jesus look back and see how God saves His people. Our salvation from punishment for sin was accomplished by the death of Jesus, and only by the death of Jesus. Without the death of Jesus, we would never escape hell. If we are to be saved, we must believe that Jesus died for us, for our sins.

### ***Full Salvation***

No one credibly doubts that Jesus of Galilee was crucified. The real debate is about what happened afterward. Aside from Muslims, most people accept that Jesus truly died. The really interesting question is where He went when He died. Christians believe that three days later Jesus came back to life, but that is the topic for next week. So where was Jesus between Friday and Sunday?

There is a flourishing variety of opinions about what Jesus did between Friday and Sunday. Our creed says that He descended into hell. But what does that mean? And some people think the creed is wrong on this point. So on one side of the spectrum you have the view that the Bible never says that Jesus descended into hell. Jesus *did* say to the thief dying with him that they would be together in paradise that same day. So some people take this as absolute proof that Jesus most clearly did *not* go to hell after He died. Respected writers such as John Piper and Wayne Grudem take this position, and they go so far as to advocate for removing this phrase from the creed altogether. On the other side of the spectrum is the conviction that Jesus *did* go into hell after His death. This view is accompanied by a wonderful variety of ideas of what He did there, some of which read more like fantasy literature than theological reflection. And in the middle are those who think that Jesus went into hell in some way, but with various qualifications about what that means.

We could take a whole evening to explore this issue and still just touch on the primary features. Instead we will merely make a few remarks for further reflection. First, the fact that Jesus announced He

would go to paradise on the day of His death does not mean that He could not go to hell beforehand, or afterwards. Aside from Jesus' words to the thief, the Bible says nothing about what Jesus did in those three days. So any view is speculation, and it is simplistic to get dogmatic about it. Second, it is a mistake to take religious fantasy as theological reflection or historical fact. Dante's *Inferno* is a magnificent piece of literature, and it is spiritually rewarding in many ways. But it is not reliable theology or history. Speaking of religious fantasy, while it is a mistake to take it as theology, it is also a mistake to cast it aside as worthless or false. Each literary genre makes its own contribution to our spirituality, but it must be understood on its own terms. Third, we must admit that the Bible is essentially silent on this topic. Apparently God does not think it is necessary for us to know what Jesus did between the cross and the resurrection. Therefore dogmatic assertions are entirely out of line. And while it is not wrong to ponder this question – in fact, it is quite normal – it *is* wrong to fight over it.

So if God does not think it is important to dwell on this topic, is it indeed out of place in a creed which defines the essentials of our faith? Perhaps not. John Calvin concluded that the hell Jesus experienced was His torment on the cross, as He hung there, the object of God's terrible wrath. Whatever view you take on this question, I think that the essential point being made here is that Jesus did everything necessary for our salvation. Perhaps He did actually storm into hell, engage Satan in hand-to-hand combat, and win a great victory. I doubt that is what happened, but I know that whatever needed to be done in those three days to accomplish our salvation, Jesus did those things. When we say that we believe Jesus descended into hell, we are affirming that Jesus went all the way into the darkness, and the darkness did not prevail against Him.

### ***Is this your creed?***

And now the most important question of the evening: is this creed your creed? Some churches say the Apostles Creed or the longer Nicene Creed every week in worship. If that is the case with your church, is this creed true for you? The word "creed" comes from the first word in the Latin version, "Credo," which is translated "I believe." Do you? If you say these words every week, do you truly believe them. But if your church does not say a creed each week, or if you do not attend worship in any church, is this your creed? Do you believe these things? This is important because the creed is more than a part of the worship liturgy. It is more than a statement of what Christians believe. The creed is a statement of the most important facts in the universe.

NASA is in the final testing stages of the new James Webb Space Telescope. It has been under construction for 20 years, and will be 100 times more powerful than its precedent-shattering predecessor, the Hubble Telescope. Scientists are hoping to discover amazing new information about the universe when this telescope is launched in 2018. It will usher in a new epoch in astronomy. But important as the James Webb Space Telescope is to science, the facts it reveals will be insignificant compared to the facts that are right in front of you in the Apostles Creed. The fundamental reality of the universe is that it was created by God, a God who is Father, Son and Spirit; that Jesus the divine Son became man and died for our sins, rose from the dead, and rules in heaven. These facts are fundamental because they are true. But they are essential because they show the only way of salvation. The creed is important to you, because if this is not your creed, if you do not believe these things, you will perish in God's anger forever.

If you hear these words, and just cannot buy the things they say, do this. Ask God to show you the truth. Many others in your place have said, "God, I don't know if you are there, and I honestly cannot swallow the things in this creed. But if you are there, help me, and show me how to believe in Jesus." Here is a promise you can count on. Jesus said that He accepts everyone who comes to Him. Come to Jesus. You will discover the truth of this creed, but even better, you will find the joy of knowing God.

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*Prayer*

Lord God, thank you for providing in the Apostles Creed a summary of Your wonderful act of salvation. Thank you for humbling Yourself and taking the form of a man. Thank you for taking our sin upon You. Thank you for dying in our place. O Lord, even though You loved us so much You did all these things for us, still some people do not believe in You. Be merciful to those lost in doubt. Grant them the faith to believe in You and enter into Your Kingdom. Through the name of Jesus Christ and for His sake, Amen.

C. David Green  
Brown University  
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