

Today we're continuing our look at some of the foundational beliefs of the Christian faith. We are using the Apostle's Creed as our starting point, then examining the scriptures to see the Biblical basis for these beliefs.

Today we're looking at the section which deals with our belief in Jesus Christ. It goes like this: I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Let's break this down and look closer at what the creed states. First, I believe in Jesus Christ, the Father's only Son. I spent quite a bit of time talking about the divine nature Jesus as the Father's only Son in last month's lesson on the Trinity. If you missed it, you can visit the Live For Him Ministries website and find the lesson on the Academy page. Because we covered that then, we're going to move on to the next phrase, "our Lord."

What does it mean to call Jesus, Lord? Outside of church, we don't use the word lord very much, if at all. To say Jesus is Lord means that he is the one with the ultimate authority. The Bible describes Jesus as the head of the church, the ruler over all creation, the Lord of lords and King of kings (Colossians 1:15-18; Revelation 3:14, 17:14). In other words, he's the one who is in charge.

To say that he is in charge, includes everything that happens in heaven and on the earth. No one—not even those who deny His existence—can be free of his rule or outside his sphere of authority.

Even death cannot release anyone from the authority of God's Son. As the creed states later, he will return and judge both the living and the dead. It is as Paul says in Philippians 2:9-11: "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

All people must decide to either yield or rebel against Him, but they only have the opportunity to make this choice while they are still living. After death, they will acknowledge Christ's lordship through accountability to him. If we have not bowed a knee to Jesus in life, we will be forced to bend it at the judgment of all, for Jesus is Lord.

The creed continues: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.

For 2,000 years, people have sought to deny Jesus' virgin birth. However, those who deny the virgin birth contradict the clear teaching of Scripture, call into question other miracles recorded in the Bible, and open the door to a denial of Christ's full deity or his full humanity.

The reality is that the virgin birth of Jesus is a crucially important doctrine and one that the Bible plainly teaches in the first chapters of Matthew and Luke.

Let's look at how Scripture describes the virgin birth. In Luke chapter 1, the angel Gabriel visits the Virgin Mary to bring her the news that she would be the mother of the God's Son. Mary asks, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34). Gabriel's reply indicates the miraculous nature of the conception: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). The angel points not to any human act but to the Holy Spirit and the power of God as the agency of Jesus' birth. Jesus would properly be called the Son of God.

Gabriel later repeats the news to Joseph, engaged to be married to Mary. Gabriel says "What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20). Joseph needed this information because, "before they came together, [Mary] was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:18). Accepting God's word on the matter, Joseph proceeded to take Mary as his wife, but she remained a virgin until after Jesus was born: "He did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born." (Matthew 1:25).

Matthew and Luke were also very careful to affirm Jesus' virgin birth in the list of his ancestors. Matthew writes, "Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Mary gave birth to Jesus, who is called the Messiah"

(Matthew 1:16). And Luke says it this way, “Jesus was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph” (Luke 3:23).

Why is the virgin birth so important? First, because it is proof of the incarnation of Jesus, as John put it, “The Word became flesh.” (John 1:14) The incarnation is when the eternal Son of God took on human flesh; without losing any of His divine nature, He added a human nature. That miraculous, history-changing event took place in the Virgin Mary’s womb. The virgin birth is the only explanation which preserves the truth that Jesus is fully God and fully human at the same time.

Another reason that the virgin birth of Jesus is important is that it is an example of God’s gracious work on our behalf. God took the initiative—Mary was not looking to become pregnant—it was all God’s idea. Joseph had no role in the conception, so the power had to come from God. In a similar way, our salvation is based solely on God’s initiative and God’s power—we did not seek God, but He sought us; and we did nothing to earn our salvation, but we rely on God’s power.

This leads us to the next phrase in the Apostle’s Creed, (He) suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again;

Jesus died at the age of 33 after a life of about 12,000 days. The gospel writers devoted most of the writings to just 1,100 days, the last 3 years of his life when he was in public ministry. They have a special interest in one day. The last day of Jesus’ life. They believed this 24 hour period changed the world and every gospel account focuses in on it. In fact, nearly 1/3rd of all that we know about Jesus takes place during this day.

Beginning Thursday evening after sunset and lasting through Friday afternoon, Jesus would eat the Last Supper with his disciples; pray in the garden of Gethsemane; be betrayed and deserted by his friends; be convicted of blasphemy by the religious authorities; be tried and sentenced by Pontius Pilate; be tortured by Roman soldiers; and finally be crucified, died and was buried.

When the apostle Paul summarized the gospel for the Corinthians Christians, he said this, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2:2) The

suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the heart of the gospel and the completion of the saving work which God began in the virgin birth.

Tomorrow we're going to be looking in depth about what Jesus' death and resurrection means for us today, so let's press on and look at the next phrase of the Creed.

It says, "he ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father,"

The ascension of Jesus Christ is told in Acts 1:3-11, therefore we believe it took place. However, the ascension of Christ is not something we talk much about. In fact, I don't recall in my 35 years of ministry ever preaching a sermon on the meaning of the ascension. As I was studying in preparation for this lesson, I realized I missed a very important element in the story of Christ. I don't want you to make that same mistake. I'm going to be using some of the teachings of Pastor Matthew Burden as the basis for what I want to share with you.

The ascension is the crowning jewel in the crown of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. When looked at from the right perspective, we can see how the imagine of Jesus rising into the clouds is an important event, indeed, the scripture speaks of it as an essential part of God's plan of salvation. Not only is it necessary, but the disciples even refer to it as a primary proof that Jesus was the Messiah.

Rather than trying to explain away Jesus' absence, they proclaim it repeatedly. For the early disciples, the crucifixion, the resurrection and the ascension go hand in hand. (Acts 2:33-36; 3:18-21; 5:30-31).

Even Jesus connects the ascension with his work of dying and rising again. When Mary Magdalene sees him in the garden after his resurrection, he tells her: "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father" (John. 20:17).

The ascension is the triumphal act that crowns both the royal and priestly ministries of the Messiah. Here the son of David, the rightful heir to the kingdom of God ascends to reign forever and the great high priest completes the presentation of the atoning sacrifice.

First, consider the kingship angle. The ascension appears to be an exact fulfillment of the prophetic vision of Daniel 7:13–14. In that vision, the Son of Man, surrounded with clouds, approaches the throne of the Ancient of Days and is given the dominion of an everlasting kingdom. Notice that the prophecy does not show the Messiah’s rule beginning with an earthly reign, but quite specifically with a heavenly one.

The ascension is the triumphal crowning of the king. Jesus has done what good kings in the ancient world were expected to do: he has saved his people from their enemies. He has defeated the powers of sin, Satan, and death, and now he makes his ascent to the throne—just as the kings of old made their ascent back to Jerusalem after a successful military campaign.

If Jesus had remained on earth and tried to claim his kingship, then he could not have been the Messiah—for the true Son of Man had been prophesied as ascending into the presence of God, there to be given his reign.

Having accomplished these kingly acts, Jesus approaches the Ancient of Days and is crowned with splendor and honor and sits down at the right hand of God the Father almighty. Although we still await his return, and the time when his reign to be fully and finally established, that reign has already begun.

The ascension also shows Jesus performing the priestly work of the Messiah. Early Christians considered Jesus’ death on the cross to be a sacrifice of atonement. Romans 3:25 says, “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood.” This act of atonement is what brings us forgiveness for our sins.

However, coming from the context of Israel’s temple culture, it would have struck most Jewish believers as incomplete to say that the Cross was all there was to Jesus’ ritual of sacrifice. As anyone in the ancient world knew, a sinner needed a further step in the ritual of atonement: a sacrifice to be slain and a high priest took the sacrificial blood into the presence of God.

The Jews annually celebrated the Day of Atonement, when the sacrifice for the people’s sin was killed on the great altar outside the temple doors. But that was only the first part of the ritual. To Jewish ears, the claim that the

crucifixion alone was the sacrifice of atonement would have sounded like saying that the sacrifice had been slain on the altar and no more.

What about the next step of the ritual? The high priest was to take the blood of the sacrifice and ascend the steps of the temple—to enter into the sanctuary of the Lord surrounded by billowing clouds of incense.

The high priest would step up into that cloud, vanishing from the sight of those watching in the temple courts, and then proceed into the Holy of Holies. There, in the presence of God, the high priest would present the blood of the sacrifice, completing the ritual of atonement and interceding for the people. Then he would emerge, coming back down through the cloud of incense in the same way the crowds had seen him leave, bearing the assurance of salvation to the people of God.

The theological implication here is that the ascension of Jesus was the next necessary step in the ritual following the cross. This does not imply that anything was lacking in what Jesus did in his saving work on the cross—only that this completed sacrifice was always intended to be followed by another step in the process, which was bearing his sacrifice into the heavenly Holy of Holies.

Having led to his ascension, the Apostle's Creed concludes the portion on Jesus Christ with the statement, "he will come again to judge the living and the dead." Whenever I lead a communion service, I always include what is known as the mystery of faith. That is; Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Those brief sentences proclaim the essence of the Christian faith. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Without all three, Christianity would not exist.

Jesus often spoke of his return in the parables he told. And the angels who appeared after his ascension said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." After that, the writers of the New Testament fill their writings with the promise of Christ's return. In fact, 80% of the letters which are a part of the New Testament include verses about Christ's return.

A lot of preaching that refers to Christ's return is centered on looking for signs of his return. And while many New Testament writers speak about

signs, that's not the most important lesson the Bible has to teach us about the topic, especially if you look at Jesus' parables on the subject. Jesus' parables on his return can be summed up in two words; be ready.

Let me suggest 5 ways we can be ready for Jesus' return.

1. BE DISCERNING.

Twice in Mark 13 Jesus warned his disciples not to be led astray by false teachers: "Watch out that no one deceives you... false prophets will appear and perform signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, the even the elect" (Mark 13:5-6,21-22). Paul warned, "Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him.... Don't let anyone deceive you in any way" (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3). This is one of the reasons that I believe studying the Apostle's Creed is so important. Knowing the truth about God which the church has taught throughout the ages, helps keep us from being deceived.

2. ACCEPT THE MYSTERY

Jesus said, "Now concerning that day or hour no one knows—neither the angels in heaven nor the Son—but only the Father. Watch! Be alert! For you don't know when the time is coming" (Mark 13:32-33). If Jesus was content not to know the day or hour, then let's stop speculating about it. Be content with the mystery that "no one knows ... only the Father."

3. ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER.

The promise that "the Lord will descend from heaven with a shout" in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 is followed by a command: "Therefore encourage one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18). Again, the affirmation that "the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5:2) is followed by the command: "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up" (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

4. LIVE AS IF TODAY WAS THE DAY.

If we're not careful, the delay in Jesus' return will prevent us from thinking about it at all. Living in the expectation that He could return today compels us to live every day for what really matters, eternity.

5. REMEMBER JESUS COMES AS OUR JUDGE.

Like the servants who were given bags of gold in Matthew 25:14-30, each person will have to give an account for how they lived their lives. So live in such a way that you will hear Jesus say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

We’ve covered a lot of material today, but before we end, I want to give you a chance to ask any questions or make any comments you have.