

HOPE AGAIN: When Life Hurts and Dreams Fade

STUDY TEN

Hope Beyond the Creeds: Focusing Fully on Jesus Christ

1 Peter 3:18–22

Isn't this passage a grand statement of faith? It's almost like another creed that one might memorize or state from Sunday to Sunday.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

SINCE the birth of the church, Christians across the world have joined voices to recite shared liturgies called “creeds.” When we speak the words of these creeds, we reaffirm our trust in the most essential Christian beliefs. One of the most popular creeds is called the Apostles’ Creed:

*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 Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried;
He descended to hell;
the third day he rose again from the dead;
He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from there He will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.*



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Those who confess these theological truths today participate in the global, centuries-long chorus of committed followers of Jesus Christ . . . going all the way back to the days of the apostles.

This *Searching the Scriptures* study looks at what may be one of the earliest creeds regularly recited by the first Christians. By standing on these ancient, powerful words, we will not only *affirm* our faith in Christ, but we also will *bolster* it in preparation for when we will inevitably endure seasons of great testing.



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Some creeds are long and dense, but the beauty of the gospel is that it is still simple enough for a small child to understand and believe. Say this simple prayer to affirm your faith in God:

Father, I believe in You. I believe that Your Son died for my sins, and I believe that He has saved me. I believe that You have already given me new life through the Holy Spirit, and I believe that I will live with You forever. I trust You. Strengthen my faith today. I pray these things in Jesus' faithful and true name. Amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

The original recipients of the letter called 1 Peter endured great suffering. Some faced violent persecution. Others lost their homes and their jobs. And many were separated from their families and communities . . .

All because of their faith.

Such poor treatment might seem deserved for criminals and crooks, but Peter's audience consisted of good people who simply wanted to serve their Lord and do well to others. In light of these challenging circumstances, Peter shared even more challenging words in *1 Peter 3:17*: "Remember, it is better to suffer for doing good, if that is what God wants, than to suffer for doing wrong!"

Though Peter's words may seem preposterous, he proved his point in *3:18–22* by pointing to the example of the One who endured great suffering while being the greatest human who ever lived: Jesus Christ. Peter knew that by anchoring his trust in the just One who died for the unjust, he could endure the fiercest storms of suffering and mistreatment.



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Observation: An Ancient Creed

Before you begin making observations, read *1 Peter 3:18–19 in the New English Translation*.¹ Do you notice how these verses are offset from the rest? This format helps us see these words as an ancient creed—a simple snapshot of the gospel. Read the words aloud. Feel the rhythm of the poetry. Let the truth wash over you.

According to *3:18–19*, for what purpose did Christ suffer and die? What happened after Jesus died?

In *3:20*, to what historical figure did Peter compare the work of Christ?

According to *3:21*, what did the water represent in Peter's extended metaphor? What does this water accomplish?



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According to [1 Peter 3:22](#), where is Christ at the present moment in time? What kind of status does He currently maintain?

Our Lord Jesus Christ, in dying on the cross, provided us with an entree into heaven. He gave us access. And the access to heaven is now permanently paved. It is available to all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: Dead, Buried, and Risen with Christ

This passage contains a couple of key issues that Bible scholars debate even today. But don't let what's muddy distract you from what is as clear as fresh water.

Imagine you were sharing the gospel with someone, and you could only use [1 Peter 3:18–22](#) in your conversation. What would you say? In other words, what essential truths of the Christian faith are embedded within this brief paragraph? As you write your response, take note of how these truths match up with the words of the Apostles' Creed.

As you explain the gospel according to [3:18–22](#), you might run into a tricky question based on [3:21](#): *Is Peter saying that I am saved through the work of baptism?*



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The key to answering this question is found in the expression “not the removal of dirt from the flesh.” The Greek word *sarx* literally refers to physical flesh, but the biblical authors tended to use the term figuratively to refer to humankind’s sinful tendencies. In his statement in *1 Peter 3:21*, Peter appeals to *both* the literal and the figurative use of the term *sarx*.

How does this literary context help you understand the meaning of Peter’s words about baptism? If baptism cannot cleanse your sinful flesh, then what does it represent? For some guidance, check out *Constable’s Notes* at netbible.org.

One lingering interpretive question remains that causes even the most learned believers to scratch their heads in confusion: What in the world did Peter mean when he said that Jesus “went and preached to the spirits in prison” (*3:19*)? To answer this question, we must turn back the pages of time to one of the earliest moments of creation.



Correlation: Christ and the Spirits

When Peter referenced Noah in *1 Peter 3:20*, he provided an interpretive key that allows his readers to unlock the meaning of his cryptic words in *3:19*. In these verses, Peter connected Christ’s work of salvation to the well-known history of Noah and the great flood.

Genesis 6:1–8 records the context of the events that precipitated God’s choice to send the cataclysmic flood. *Genesis 6:5* notes the main reason why God sent the flood: “The LORD observed the extent of human wickedness on the earth, and he saw that everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil.”



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God wouldn't allow humanity's evil actions to persist in His presence, yet the evil of another group also offended God's righteous character. According to *Genesis 6:2*, what did the "sons of God" do? According to *6:4*, what was the result of these actions?

Christians have long debated the identity of these "sons of God," yet it seems best to view them as fallen angels. By having children with human women, these supernatural beings polluted the human race, causing God's true image-bearers to bear children in the image of their demonic fathers. God would not allow these creatures to continue to mar His beautiful creation.

It might sound like Jesus preached a gospel of salvation to these evil spirits, but the Greek word translated "preached" is *not* the term typically used to describe evangelism. Instead, Jesus made a certain *proclamation*. What message did Jesus declare when He visited these spirits? For help, look at pages 222–225 of Pastor Chuck Swindoll's commentary, *Insights on James, 1 & 2 Peter*.



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In light of this context, what message about Christ’s work of salvation did Peter communicate by comparing Christ to Noah in 1 Peter 3:20?

The cross is our ark. It is our way of life. It is the way to get through the death-like world about us. And baptism came in as a beautiful expression or picture of the waters of death.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Peter concluded this section by portraying Jesus sitting on the throne of heaven, with “all the angels and authorities and powers” bowing to Him (3:22). No human, no angel, no demon is greater than Jesus. Only by His descent into the grave could He emerge King of the universe at His resurrection.



Application: My Belief, My Response

By rehearsing the words of the creeds, we do more than simply affirm the historic Christian faith. These words also strengthen our faith in preparation for times of trial. How? Pastor Chuck points out two specific ways.

First, when unjust suffering seems unbearable, remember the crucifixion. What do you find most comforting about your shared suffering with Christ? How can this comfort strengthen your trust in Him the next time you face a season of suffering?



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Second, when fear steals your peace, remember the resurrection. What fears have been invading your mind lately? How can the hope that you will one day be resurrected with Jesus Christ expel those fears?

You may not know what the future holds, but you can have deep assurance that the truths Peter recorded in his letter will stand the test of time. And when you find your faith faltering, remember the words of one struggling follower of Jesus: “I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!” (*Mark 9:24*).



A FINAL PRAYER

For your closing prayer, go back to the beginning of this study and read aloud the Apostles’ Creed as a prayer to God. As you speak these powerful truths, hear them as a declaration of faith in the life-changing work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in your life and in the history of the world.

ENDNOTE

1. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll’s *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the web page, “*How to Study the Bible for Yourself*.”

