

1 Peter 3:17-22

Hope in the storm

The Problem of An Obscure Text



When I read the text for this week, my heart sank. I knew it was there, but I had forgotten about it, and so when I read it again, I thought to myself – *“I don’t want to preach on this. I don’t know what it means, and I’m willing to bet that no one else does either.”* And,.. I was right! I can tell you what others have come up with and then I would say to each theory – *“Don’t count on it”*. Now, there are a few places like this in the New Testament scriptures that are a quandary for us today. This one is obviously a reference to some teaching of the apostles about Jesus that was generally known by the early church, but which was basically lost in any detailed form except offhand allusions to it, such as what we see in our text today. So here we see that the evidence in the text is so scanty and sketchy that we cannot come to any solid conclusion about its meaning. The overall meaning of this one is forever to remain one of those head-scratchers. But without more to go on, we can only speculate. So that is what any view on this passage is. It is speculation or theorizing. Now, speculation is not a bad thing. Speculation says that it might mean this or it might mean that. Speculation is a hypothesis that says that I think that it means this, or that it is more likely to mean this other thing, but I cannot prove it conclusively through the textual or contextual evidence available to me. The problem with this passage and passages like it is that Christians tend to come to hard conclusions about them rather than the loosely held opinion they *should* be taking! We are not supposed to come to a strong doctrinal stand on something unless there is plenty of corroborating evidence – cross references - or other verses that address the subject. On this particular text there has been much meaningless debate and plenty of conjecture – most of it overdone and well heeled over into the realm of ridiculousness. Now, that does mean that this text is not intriguing. It brings up some tantalizing possibilities - but that is all the farther we can go with it or we run into serious error! Remember that every wrong turn in biblical interpretation can lead to catastrophic consequences – especially when you are dealing with the hearts and souls of human beings. Across the breadth of the planet, as a fallen race, we are easily led astray and into error, which in time, becomes treasured truth and tradition! Every time that happens, the gospel truth is corrupted inward from the edges and even entering the center!



I was reading the old creeds this week in preparation for this sermon – the Apostle’s Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Augsburg Confession, and others - some of which are absolutely amazing in the way they spell out the orthodox stand on difficult issues. Take, for instance, nature of the Trinity of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Of course the tri-unity of God – one God in three persons – is impossible for us to fully grasp. Since we have little in our experience in this life to go on, the concept seems impossible. Yet the scriptures declare it clearly and do not seem to seem to feel the need to try to break it down and explain it. Well, brilliant word smiths of old, theologians extraordinaire, crafted these creeds that outline the most important, the most foundational doctrinal truths of the Christian faith. Because false teaching was so prevalent in the early church, these creeds were being crafted to counteract bad theology in an era in which most people could not read, and because the scriptures were therefore closed to them, the creeds were a great tool for Christian pastors and leaders to drive home what were considered the essential truths of the gospel of Jesus. They were repeated endlessly during services and memorized by children as part of their initiation into the church. The problem was that they had to rely on other people’s interpretations and breakdowns of the scriptures without being able to examine the actual documents of the scriptures themselves. So *if* these theologians got it wrong, then **EVERYONE** got it wrong! The point is that these creeds were in the main part incredibly precise and accurate and helpful! But then, some of them would include an element that was dubious in nature or which were outright in error. Like discovering a big fly in your delicious bowl of soup! Case in point - the Nicene Creed.



Nicene Creed – 381 A.D.

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth, and of all things
visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
begotten of his Father before all worlds,
God of God, Light of Light,
very God of very God,
begotten, not made,
being of one substance with the Father;
by whom all things were made;
who for us men and for our salvation
came down from heaven,
and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the
Virgin Mary,
and was made man;
and was crucified also for us under Pontius
Pilate;
he suffered and was buried;

and the third day he rose again according to
the Scriptures,
and ascended into heaven,
and sitteth on the right hand of the Father;
and he shall come again, with glory,
to judge both the quick and the dead;
whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost the Lord, the
Giver of Life,
who proceedeth from the Father and the Son;
who with the Father and the Son together is
worshipped
and glorified;
who spake by the Prophets.

And I believe one holy Catholic
and Apostolic Church;

I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission
of sins;

and I look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen. ^[2]



THE APOSTLE'S CREED

- ~I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth
- ~I believe in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord
- ~He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary
- ~He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.
- ~He descended into hell 🖐️ On the third day He rose again.
- ~He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
- ~He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
- ~I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of the saints
- ~The forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting, Amen

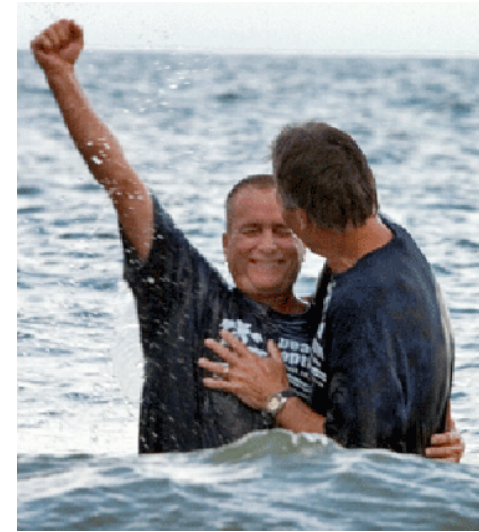


Athanasian Creed (Late 400s or early 500s B.C. – author unknown)

Whoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold to the Catholic faith. Which faith unless everyone do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the Catholic Faith is this that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity; neither confound the Persons nor dividing the Essence. For there is one Person of the Father; another of the Son; and another of the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreate; the Son uncreated; and the Holy Ghost uncreated. The Father unlimited, the Son unlimited, and the Holy Ghost unlimited. The Father eternal; the Son eternal; and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternals but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated nor three infinities, but one uncreated, and one infinite. So likewise, the Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty, and the Spirit Almighty. And yet they are not three Almighties but one Almighty. And so the Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Spirit is God. And yet they are not three Gods but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Ghost Lord. And yet not three Lords but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to acknowledge every Person in Himself to be God and Lord; so we are forbidden by the Catholic religion to say there are three Gods and three Lords. The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone, not made, not created, but begotten. The Holy Ghost is of the the Father and of the Son, neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts. And in this Trinity one is neither before, nor after another; none is greater, or less than another. But the whole three Persons are coeternal and coequals. So that in all things, as aforesaid, the unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in unity to be worshipped. He, therefore, that will be saved, let him thus think of the Trinity.



So where do you think that one obvious line at the end of the Nicene Creed came from? It came from this passage! It came from **1 Peter 3:21**, referring to the “*Baptism that now saves you...*”. It is a perfect example of a poor examination of the intended meaning of the writer. In fact it is *GLARINGLY* poor treatment of the text. After being so precise in everything else, then suddenly there is this. The text does not say that it is baptism that saves us, in fact it specifically point out as the sentence continues that it is specifically NOT the water on the body that saves a person, but what is going on in their mind and heart at the time – obviously before, during, and after the physical ritual. The sentence in **its totality** make it crystal clear that if you get physically baptized without this “*pledge of a good conscience toward God*”, then you are doing nothing more than getting wet. Now, why would these early scholars, to whom theology was an obsession, make such a novice mistake – such a sloppy exegesis of what this verse is trying to get across. To refer to the act of baptism, (and to be sure, it is referencing the physical act of baptism – the water on the body – the going under and the coming up out of the water - for the word “baptism” means to immerse) – to refer to it as the source of salvation is actually a ludicrous conclusion for these studious men to come to. It is reckless in the extreme and has jeopardized people souls ever since it was codified into the creed. People didn’t know the full statement of the verse. For 1900 years, most could not read their own language, much less the fact that they could not read or understand the Latin it was written in until the 1500s! They only had **the creed** which leaves the distinct impression that it is the physical ritual that saves, not the inner decision and mental/emotional process that goes on in conversion – when a person goes from opposing God to receiving/welcoming Him into the center of their existence where He belongs! So as a person is being baptized, their mind is going over the process that brought them to this crucial point of a life-changing, status-quo-shattering decision to welcome Jesus into the control center of our life! Christians call it “conversion” - a changing over of our minds from one side to the other - a choosing of sides! The physical act of Baptism is described in Rom. 6 as an identifying action, mentally going under – dying – with Christ, as if the water is a type of burial underground, a dying to our old life – a life which we have repented of, and renounced, and left behind as displeasing to God. And then we rise from the water, like a resurrection from the grave, into a new life, a life in which God is **acknowledged** confidently, **worshipped** fervently, and **obeyed** joyfully!



Many say that this is an obvious reference to the idea that Jesus was busy between the time he died on the cross and his resurrection - that he went to hell, or a holding place – a prison of sorts that warehouses the condemned souls of people who have died throughout history, until the history of the the world is concluded and the Great White Throne judgment day arrives when the judgment of God upon officially is pronounced the rebellious ones and they are cast into the "Lake of Fire" with the Devil and his angels(demons). I'm not going to argue for or against this theory. It actually seems to best match with what little evidence Peter provides, but, again, there is not enough corroborating evidence in scripture to make a definitive doctrine out of it! Yet it has been done, and even added to an ancient creed - which *never* should have been done. Most of the venerable councils that created the early creeds had the sense to leave sketchy things like this out of a statement of essential Christian beliefs. But the Nicene statement then seemed to give rise to and support the great doctrinal error of the Roman Catholic church to the add-on belief of **purgatory** that has been so detrimental to the Christian faith. Is there a holding place? I don't know and no one really knows. Could there be something like a purgatory for disobedient souls? Again, I don't know. I don't think so, but I don't know. I tend to think the disobedient go to hell, but then that begs the question of why are they cast into the Lake of Fire at the end of the old earth, if hell is where they already are? Is hell the place of darkness and gnashing of teeth that Jesus described, and then hell changes at the end into a lake of fire and brimstone, and its sufferings are re-doubled? Maybe, but can I give you another dose of "I don't know for sure"?



Here is what we know and here is what we should focus on worrying ourselves about. We know there is a hell! It is revealed to be eternal. It is a terrible place of retribution where people pay for their own sins. The good news of the gospel message is essentially that Jesus died for those sins and that anyone who trusts in Him enough to ask for His salvation, their sins will be paid for by His arduous work on the cross! His blood will atone and will cleanse so thoroughly that we will be made perfectly ready to live in harmony with a pure and holy God for all eternity! We will be placed in another holding place – an infinitely better one – we will be placed in Christ, the Great Reservoir of Souls, where we are enriched beyond measure with all that He is and all that He has earned so honorably and courageously. It all is transferred over and becomes ours as we enter the vast realm of God where He dwells and reigns supreme!