

# The Creeds

## Part 3: I Believe in Jesus Christ, His Only Son, our Lord

Old Roman Symbol (2 <sup>nd</sup> Century)	Apostle's Creed (3 <sup>rd</sup> – 7 <sup>th</sup> Centuries)	First Council of Nicaea (325)	First Council of Constantino- ple (381)
and in Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord,	And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord	And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God,] Light of Light, very God of very God, begot- ten, not made, consubstan- tial with the Father;	And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the <i>only-begotten</i> Son of God, begotten of the Father <i>before all worlds (æons)</i> , Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, con- substantial with the Father;
		By whom all things were made [both in heaven and on earth]	by whom all things were made;
Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,	Who was <b>conceived</b> by the Holy Spirit and <b>born</b> of the Vir- gin Mary	Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man;	who for us men, and for our salvation, came down <i>from</i> <i>heaven</i> , and was incarnate <i>by</i> <i>the Holy Ghost and of the Vir-</i> <i>gin Mary</i> , and was made man;
Who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried,	<b>Suffered</b> under Pon- tius Pilate, was cru- cified, <b>died</b> , and was buried	He <b>suffered</b> ,	he <i>was crucified for us under</i> <i>Pontius Pilate</i> , and <b>suffered</b> , and was buried,
on the third day rose again from the dead,	He <b>descended into</b> <b>hell</b> ; on the third day he rose again from the dead	and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven;	and the third day he rose again, <i>according to the Scrip-</i> <i>tures</i> , and ascended into heaven, and <i>sitteth on the right hand of the</i> <i>Father</i> ;
ascended to heaven, sits at the right hand of the Fa- ther,	He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of <b>God the Fa-</b> <b>ther almighty</b>	From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.	from thence he shall come <i>again, with glory</i> , to judge the quick and the dead; <i>whose kingdom shall have no</i> <i>end</i> .
whence He will come to judge the living and the dead;	From there he will come to judge the living and the dead		
Blue: Old Roman Sym- bol	Red: Apostle's Creed Addition	Green: First Nicaea Addition	Orange: Second Nicaea Addition

# The Greatest Man in History

His words carry weight that would break a lesser interesting man's jaw. He is the life of parties he has never attended. People hang on his every word, even the prepositions. If he were to pat you on the back, you would list it on your resume. Sharks have a week dedicated to him. His beard alone has experienced more than a lesser man's entire body. Sasquatch has taken a photograph of him. He's been known to cure narcolepsy just by walking into a room. His legend precedes him, the way lightning precedes thunder. His reputation is expanding faster than the universe.<sup>1</sup> Who is the *true* Most Interesting Man in the World?

There has been no more written or debated, loved or hated, orthodox or updated, historical or conflated, controversial or restated figure in human history *than Jesus of Nazareth*. People who don't believe in him still find themselves fixated on him. People who know nothing about him still use his name as a curse-word. Some want him as simply a great teacher. Others say his "lost years" found him wandering around India, becoming an ascended master. Some say he didn't die in Jerusalem, that he went off with Mary

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from "Every Most Interesting Man In The World Commercial Ever," *Youtube* (may 18, 2020), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guMrgRKKENI&ab\\_channel=LifeIsBrewtiful](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guMrgRKKENI&ab_channel=LifeIsBrewtiful).

Magdalene to France where he sired an entire royal bloodline. Still others say he never even existed, and that he is just a myth in line with others of death and resurrection such as Baldr, Osiris, and Quetzalcoatl.

In [the famous trilemma](#) (to which I've seen a fourth important point added), good Christian apologists will explain that Jesus was either [a liar](#), a [lunatic](#), (a [legend](#)<sup>2</sup>), or the [Lord](#). These are mutually exclusive; only one can be true, and one must be true. [John Duncan](#), a Calvinist minister in the Free Church of Scotland once said, "[Christ either deceived mankind by conscious fraud, or He was Himself deluded and self-deceived, or He was Divine. There is no getting out of this trilemma. It is inexorable.](#)"<sup>3</sup> This statement rests on the grounds that Jesus was real, made impossible claims about himself, and then did impossible things to prove their validity. These claims are [historical](#). They are [public](#). They are open to investigation of all types (legal, moral, sociological, archeological, historical, etc.). Because of how serious they

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<sup>2</sup> I take for granted that one or all three of the previously mentioned mythological figures may have truly lived on this earth. I have zero problem with that. That by itself destroys the "legend" part. However, none of their stories is even remotely similar to the historical, verified, public death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His story is unique among the stories of the world.

<sup>3</sup> [William Knight](#), *Colloquia Peripatetica: Deep-Sea Soundings Being Notes of Conversations with the Late John Duncan*, fifth ed. (London, R. & R. Clark, 1879), 109. I think the only way out of this trilemma is if he never existed, a point which Duncan did not think about. Hence, the fourth point is that he was a *legend* made up by the disciples or later people for some nefarious purpose.

are, they beg every single person to do their due diligence and come to a rational, fair conclusion, a conclusion that will have eternal consequences for a soul.

In the **Second Article** of the creeds, we turn to these claims to see what it is Christians believe about this person. In a famous lecture given at the Battersea Town Hall on Sunday March 6, 1927, the famous atheist **Bertrand Russell** stated their importance in defining a Christian. “In [the days of Augustine and Aquinas], if a man said that he was a Christian it was known what he meant. You accepted a whole collection of creeds which were set out with great precision, and every single syllable of those creeds you believed with the whole strength of your convictions.”<sup>4</sup> As we have and will see, these doctrines are not made up by the creeds, but are simply the collected teaching of the Scriptures themselves.

## Saving Faith: Ascent and Justified True Belief

Before getting to that, let’s return to the subject we began to investigate last time—the idea of **saving faith**. Saving faith is at the start of the creeds. “I believe” is the very first

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<sup>4</sup> **Bertrand Russell**, “Why I Am Not a Christian,” (1927), <https://users.drew.edu/~jlentz/why-not.html>.

words of them all, and indeed, “creed” (*credo*) means “I believe.” We saw that saving faith consists of **three components**: *notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia*. Last time we looked at *notitia*, the **basic knowledge** that one must have of God to be saved. We focused on the Father, but such knowledge is equally true of the Son and Spirit.

Today, however, we are going to turn to *assensus* as we think about God the Son. What is this? *Assensus* is **intellectual assent to the truth of a proposition**.<sup>5</sup> **First** you must know a thing. **Then** you move to a conviction and assurance that the thing is true. But just here, before we start looking specifically at the Second Article of the creed about Jesus, we need to spend a moment thinking about assent to propositions regarding faith.

Sometimes, “knowledge” can simply be learning the facts of a thing. This is really what we focused on last time with *notitia*. Yet, even last time we saw that the word can mean something deeper. “**Be still and know that I am God**” (**Ps 46:10**) necessitates **a deeper knowledge** than simply knowing a fact. It is *intimate personal* knowledge. Hence, philosophers speak of knowledge as more than just hearing facts. Knowledge is usually said, like faith, to have **three**

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<sup>5</sup> See **R.C. Sproul**, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification*, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 78.

components. It is *justified true belief*.<sup>6</sup> Let's look at them backwards.

Many do not think of *belief* as part of knowledge, but rather as faith. Of course, the end goal of *notitia* is belief.<sup>7</sup> But many people tear faith and belief right off the bone of knowledge, as if faith or belief should be an irrational *leap in the dark*, that is something that you do in spite of knowledge. *This is not biblical belief*. According to Hebrews, faith (belief) is *the assurance of what you hope for and the conviction of what you do not see (Heb 11:1)*. Conviction is *assensus*. It is not a leap in the dark, but is a sure and certain. Of what? Of something that *is true*.

Now, *people can hold* to extremely sure and certain convictions about things that *simply are not true*. My grandfather spent his entire life believing that he would be Raptured before he died. I remember seeing him in the hospital three days before the Lord took him. He told me that he had been wrong, and it was eating him up inside. Jesus did not

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<sup>6</sup> Sometimes they add a fourth component: *warrant*, which has to do with one's cognitive abilities functioning properly. We won't discuss this here. The classic book on this is *Alvin Plantinga, Warrant and Proper Function*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Bahnsen explains that knowledge is actually "*a subcategory of belief: to know something is, at least, to believe it.*" Even when someone says something like, "*I know we won the lottery, but I still can't believe it,*" the statement is not intelligible if the word "know" did not entail believing. What they really mean is, "*I believe it, but still find it unbelievable.*" *Greg Bahnsen, Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998), 159-60. This reminds me of the father of the demon possessed boy who said, "*Lord, I believe, help my unbelief*" (*Mark 9:22*).

Rapture him and now he was coming face to face with the consequences of his wrong belief. He was in fact going to have to die. Grandpa had belief, but it was not *true* belief. Therefore, he did not actually *know* about the Rapture at all. Believing something to be true when it is false is not knowledge, but it can have unwanted consequences. If you believe that you can climb the North Face of Long's Peak without ropes and you manage to get up 50 ft. only to find you were wrong, this may very well become a deadly belief.

Hence, **the third component** for knowledge. It must be *justified*. Typically, what this means is that you have **substantiated supported evidence** to back up your belief. In fact, just like people can believe false things and have no real knowledge, they can **believe true things and still have no real knowledge** of the thing. You could pick six numbers in the **lottery** because they “felt” very meaningful to you and end up winning the jackpot, but most people would call that luck, because you didn't actually have any advanced warning, especially if you did this same thing every week and lost. You could believe that the **longest tenured president** in the most excellent decade of the 80s had the initials R. R. and that he was an actor. But you thought that his name was Roy Rogers! As far as it goes, your belief is true, but your

reasoning is totally unjustified. That's called a coincidence or an accident and no one would say that you actually knew who the President or what the right numbers were.

Thus, **knowledge is *justified* true belief**. We are talking about Jesus today with **ascent** in mind because of all three persons, he is the one that it is the easiest to think about as it regards ascent and justified true belief, because Jesus was an historical, verifiable, falsifiable person. **Jesus is not Paul Bunyan**. His story is not a tall tale. Rather, what we confess about him is totally the opposite of this.

## I Believe in Jesus Christ

As we move into what the creeds say about Jesus, let us notice **the first word that introduces us to him**. The word is “**and**” (Gk: *kai*; Lat: *et*). As the Old Roman Symbol puts it, “... **and in Christ Jesus**.” As the Apostles’ Creed says, “... **and in Jesus Christ**.” What does the “and” mean here? **It means “I believe.”** Most of the creeds only say, “I believe” at the very beginning. But when they say “and,” they are connecting back to “I believe.” I believe in God the Father Almighty. *And* [I believe] in Jesus Christ... Thus, we still have **faith at the headwaters of the Second Article**. You must

believe in him, which requires knowledge *and ascent*. Let's learn more about him.

He is introduced to us with either his name first or his title. **The name is Jesus** (Ἰησοῦς, *Iēsous*, pronounced as “eeaysoos,”). **Jesus is the Greek equivalent** of the Hebrew **Joshua** (יְהוֹשֻׁעַ; *yěhōšū*). The name means “**God [Yah] Saves.**”<sup>8</sup> This name originates in the message of the angel **Gabriel**, who told Mary to call his name Jesus because he would “save” his people from their sins (**Luke 1:31**; cf. **Matt 1:21**), but also in the **typology** of Joshua who was the deliverer that brought God's people into the Promised Land after Moses died.

“**Christ**” (Χριστός, *Christos*) is not Jesus' last name. Rather, this is **his title**—the “Christ.” Hence, it sometimes comes before “Jesus” in the creeds. This is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “**anointed**” which is also “**messiah**” (מָשִׁיחַ, *mashiach*). Hence, he is Jesus the Anointed One—the Messiah. This is a title that is often attributed to David (**1Sam**

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<sup>8</sup> There is a controversy in some circles about calling him “Jesus.” Some mistakenly think that “Jesus” is some kind of bastardized version of Zeus (which actually simply means “Lord”). It isn't. The reality is that Greek has no “y” or “sh” sound, so the “ye” in Yeshua became an “eeay” sound, and the “sh” became an “s” sound. **Jesus is the Anglicized version of the Greek word.** Some people insist on calling him *Yeshua*. This is simply the Hebrew word for “Joshua” (which is the Anglicized version of that word). To say that we *must* call him Yeshua is to insist that it is illegitimate to call Jesus by the Greek word or to use an English word translated from that Greek word. I have no problem if someone wants to say Yeshua. I do have a problem if someone insists that “Jesus” is unacceptable. I have over 900 instances of his name in the Greek NT that demonstrates otherwise.

16:6, etc.), but then to **his son** as prophecy (**Ps 2:2; 89:38**). The anointed or messiah is what the coming Savior of God's people would be (**Isa 45:1**).

## *His Only Son, Our Lord*

At this point, “son” is precisely what **all four creeds** say about Jesus. But not David's son; *God's* son (which also comes from **Psalm 2 [vs. 7]**). The Roman Symbol and Apostles' Creed say Jesus is “**His [that is the Father's] only Son, our Lord.**” Last time we saw that if God is Father, he must have sons. We focused our attention on the created heavenly and earthly sons—that is humans, and especially God's chosen people. But now, we have **Jesus as God's “only” son**. But how can the Father have many sons if Jesus is the “*only*” son?

The language is clearly taken from **John's Gospel** where, popularly, Jesus is the “**only-begotten**” son of God (**John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1Jn 4:9**). This KJV language translates the Greek word *monogenes*, which is in fact the word used in the Greek versions of **all the creeds**.<sup>9</sup> The idea of the Son

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<sup>9</sup> Curiously, **the Latin versions use not one, but two different words**. Nicaea uses *unigeniture*, from *unus* (“one”) + *gentium* (“to beget”). This word bears striking relation to *genus* (“birth, origin, a race, sort, kind”) from the root *gen-* (“to beget, produce”). Notice how “kind” is one of the definitions of *genus*. However, the Roman Symbol and Apostles' Creed use *unicum*, the neuter nominative singular form of *unicus* rather than *unigeniture*. *Unicus* means “**only, single, sole, alone or its kind**” (again, note “kind”), from *unus* (“one”). As you can hear from the word,

being begotten again comes from Psalm 2. “You are my Son, today I have *begotten* you” (Ps 2:7).

When we hear “begotten,” we can’t help but think of birth and therefore of creation. So to say that Jesus is begotten, does this mean that he was created? Are Arians and Jehovah’s Witnesses correct? Perhaps it is into this very thought that the Nicaean creeds add some very important, specialized, and technical language. The First Nicene Creed says Jesus is “the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God.”

Clearly, this defines what is meant by “only begotten.” This is defined as “of the essence [ousias] of the Father.” This makes good sense, because if Jesus is begotten of the Father, he must be of the essence of his Father, the same way that each of us is of the same essence as our fathers, that is, we are humans. God the Father is God. Therefore, to be of the same essence as the Father is to be “God of God.”

This language continues in both versions of Nicaea by using different figures of speech. Second Nicaea adds that Jesus was “before all worlds” (*aeons*), meaning that his “begottenness” teaches that he never had a beginning, since he

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we derive our word “unique” from this. As we will discuss below, there is a debate over the etymology of *monogenes*. Does it derive from *gennao* meaning “begotten” or from *genos* meaning “class, kind”? What the two different Latin words in the creeds demonstrates is that the same question was obviously present in the early church.

was before all other things. Thus, it, along with the First Nicene add, “**by whom all things were made**” (with the First Nicene adding further, “**both in heaven and on earth**”). Recall that this is the very **same language used of the Father in Article One**. Now the same language is used of the Son, just as Scripture uses it of both in **Colossians 1:15-18**.

The First Nicene continues that Jesus is “**Light of Light.**” God is Light, meaning that God **the Father is Light (1Jn 1:5)**. **Jesus is the Light** that came into the world (**John 1:9**). Jesus is “**very God of very God.**” That is, he is **not a copy** of God, he is as fully and truly God as it is possible to be. Finally, he is “**begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father.**” What does consubstantial mean?

The Greek word used here is *homoousios* from *hom* (“same”) + *ousia* (“substance”). So **consubstantial** means **of the same substance or essence**.<sup>10</sup> A few years after this creed, a group of conservative (not Arian) bishops wanted to say that Jesus was *homo*i*usios* from *homoios* (“similar”) + *ousia* (“essence”). It was a single letter different. **An iota** (“I”). This historical moment gave rise the saying that is still used today, “**It makes not one iota of difference.**” In this case, that one iota was the difference between saying Jesus was God or

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<sup>10</sup> This is from the Latin translation of the word: *consubstantialis*. However, the Latin sometimes renders it *coessentialis*—co-essential.

not God, Creator or creature. Eventually, those many Bishops who argued for this word were reconciled to the Nicene fathers and the language of *homoousios*, thanks to the mending efforts of the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus).

One more reflection on these words is appropriate here. While the creeds themselves answer the question of whether Jesus is **born as in created** or **born as in of the same substance** as the Father, the Scripture actually teaches the same thing. We can get there through the word *monogenes*.

For many years, it was thought that this Greek word derived from *gennao*, meaning “**begotten.**” Hence, only (*mono*) begotten (*gennao*). However, this has since been challenged. Today, the suggestion is that it derives from *genos*, meaning “**unique or one-of-a-kind.**” (Hence, some translations, “*His only and unique son*” (**John 3:16**)). This is reflected in the Latin of the Old Roman Creed and the Apostles’ Creed, which uses the word *unicus*, from which we get “unique” (**see n. 9** above). In other words, **Jesus is the unique Son of God** or to put it another way, of all God’s sons, there are none of the same kind as Jesus. This is precisely what the Creeds all teach.

We can see this in the NT, where **Isaac** is called Abraham’s *monogenes* son (**Heb 11:17**). If we say he was the *only-*

*begotten* son, then what do you do with **Ishmael**, who was older than Isaac and was Abraham's son? But if we say that Isaac was the *unique* son, the son of a miracle birth, the son of the promise alone, then suddenly, the word makes sense. This is what we are affirming when we confess that Jesus is the "only" Son of the Father.

This is also made clearer by the next word: **Lord**. He is **Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord**. Lord is the word *kurios*. Luther has a wonderful proof-text here. It is Thomas' confession of faith: "**My Lord and my God**" (**John 20:28**). For Thomas, "**Lord**" was equivalent to God. Again, this helps us see that Jesus is God. Even though the word Lord is often applied in the NT to certain humans, since we have not yet come to Jesus' humanity, Lord must be a reference to his infinite authority as Ruler-God.

But perhaps **another kind of proof-text could help you see this. Perhaps** something like **Psalms 110:1**, one of the most quoted OT verses in the NT. "**The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at My right hand, Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.'**" The Hebrew "LORD" here is *Yahweh*, while the "Lord" is *Adonai*. Curiously, in Greek, it is the same word. Jesus takes this very text and asks the Pharisees how it is possible that David calls him Lord when the same person is

also David's Son ([Mark 12:35-37](#)). Somehow, this Lord is the greatest king of Israel's Lord! This is because he has always existed and is in fact God. This is Jesus Christ our Lord, whom David knew. And yet, he is also David's son. [This moves us to the next part](#) of the creeds.

### *He Came Down and Was Conceived by the Virgin Mary*

So far, the Creed has put it in [the realm of heaven](#) as it concerns Jesus and his [deity](#). But their next move is to show [his descent](#) from heaven to earth in the form of [a man](#). The Old Roman Symbol says, “[Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.](#)” The Apostles' Creed is [a little clearer](#). “[Who was conceived \(syllambanō\) by the Holy Spirit and born \(gennaō\) of the Virgin Mary.](#)” We are not confessing what Mormons confess, that somehow Elohim God had sexual relations with a woman. Rather, it is as the angel Gabriel announced to Mary. “[The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God](#)” ([Luke 1:35](#)).

But how did this happen? The only thing that can be said is that it was [a miracle](#). For Gabriel was very specific in who

he came to. “*A virgin* betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David” (27). Virgins are people who have never had sexual relations. Not even a single time. But of course, that’s the only way children are conceived. But all this would happen to her before she came together with Joseph, and she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:18)—the power of God, not a man.

Amazingly, that the Messiah would be born of a virgin comes from a prophecy declared 700 years prior to this. The prophecy is pointed, specific, and unambiguous. You must take it very seriously. “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, *the virgin* shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isa 7:14). Emmanuel means “God with us” (Matt 1:23).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, if he had a human father, he would not be God.

To state the obvious, this incredible prophecy took place in real human history. It took place long before the event occurred. How is that possible unless God was behind the prediction and its fulfillment?

But this leads to a similar point about Mary. Mary was a real historical figure, a human woman. She lived in a real

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<sup>11</sup> The Hebrew word *alma* can mean a virgin or more generally a young woman. Skeptics have used this to say that the prophecy is not that a virgin would give birth, but simply a young woman. However, the LXX uses the unambiguous word *parthenos*—virgin. It is the identical word used by Matthew and Luke, for they are quoting or alluding to the LXX.

place at a specific time. She was betrothed to a man named **Joseph**, who was descended from the tribe of Judah (see **Matthew 1** and **Luke 3**). We know her cousin's name (**Elizabeth**; **Luke 1:36**). Some have argued that we have her genealogy in Luke's Gospel, though I believe this is Joseph's. Nevertheless, church history has saved for us her genealogies outside of the Bible.<sup>12</sup>

Both very much and very little have been made of Mary over the centuries. These days, **Rome virtually worships her as a goddess**,<sup>13</sup> mediatrix, a woman born of Adam who was without sin. Perhaps in knee-jerk reaction, **many Protestants can barely get up the nerve to even say her name**. It is never right to worship the creation, even if she is the mother of Jesus. But what we must all do is recognize that God chose this backwoods, no-name young girl living up in Galilee to bear God in her own womb. This is an unprecedented

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<sup>12</sup> As an example, see **Sebastian Brock**, "The Genealogy of the Virgin Mary in Sinai Syr. 16," *Scrinium* II (2006): 58-71. In these texts, Mary is said to descend from Judah on her father's side, and Levi from her mother. Her ancestors are said to be Zadoq or Joachim and Dina or Hanna/Anna.

<sup>13</sup> This is brought home in a stunning way in the epilogue scene of the 2001 TV Miniseries called *Mists of Avalon*. The very last scene has the witch Morgaine lamenting the passing of the worship of the goddess. "**The worship of the goddess was forgotten. Or so I was convinced for many years...**" Suddenly, we are taken inside a local Christian church, where the nuns are all praying to Mary, even offering bowls of food to the statue in her honor. "**Until at last I realized the Goddess had survived. She had not been destroyed, but had simply adopted another incarnation.**"

privilege among all humans. And blessed was Mary for it. This really happened and many people back then knew her and her story, and they've written it down for you that you might believe.

It is just here that **the Nicene creeds** make the theology a little more pointed. “**Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man**” (First Nicene 325). The other adds, “... **came down from heaven.**” That is, this person **Jesus did not begin to exist in the womb of Mary**, but rather he *came down* from heaven and *entered* her womb, becoming a man.

The word here is “**incarnate.**” The word means “**made flesh**” or more precisely, *human flesh*. I need to say a word here about angels and even the Angel of the LORD. While angels in both testaments come here in the form of “men” (*ish* not *adam*) they still have *angelic* bodies—even if they look similar to ours. They are **not carnal** (*incarnatio*, from Latin *caro*, flesh) bodies, **not fleshly** (*sarkothenta*, from Greek *sarx*, flesh) bodies. They are **not our bodies**. Thus, even the Angel of the LORD, Christ preincarnate, was *not a human in the OT*. This only happened once in all of history to anyone, and this is Jesus the son of Mary. And he “**was made man**” (*anthropos*). A son of Adam (**Luke 3:38**).

In this, while he is of the same substance as his Father as it regards deity, he is therefore *of the same substance as his mother* as regards his *humanity*. Jesus is not a half-breed nor a demigod. Not 50% divine and 50% human. He is not a nephilim. But *fully God* and *fully man*. Philippians explains, “Though he was in *the form of God*, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the *form of a servant*, being *born in the likeness of men*. And being found in *human form...*” (Php 2:6-8). The Athanasian Creed puts it this way. “We believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, God’s Son, is both God and human, equally. He is God from the essence of the Father, begotten before time; and he is human from the essence of his mother, born in time; completely God, completely human.” If you can’t wrap your mind around this, you are not alone. It is utterly *unique*. And this is what we confess.

*Suffered Under Pontius Pilate, was Crucified, Died, and Buried*

Philippians continues, “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming *obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*” (Php 2:8). This takes us to the next

set of statements about Jesus. They regard **his suffering**. The Roman Symbol says, “**Who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried.**” The Apostles’ Creed fleshes this out a little more. “**Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.**” Interestingly, the First Nicene only says, “**He suffered.**” This is most likely because First Nicaea was using the creed in Eusebius of Caesarea’s church as a starter, and this is all it says. But the Second Nicene adds it back in, “**He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried.**”

To me, the most interesting thing they all go out of their way to tell us is that **Pontius Pilate** was part of Christ’s suffering. Why tell us this? It is because we are still dealing with real human history. The creeds will not allow us to move out into myth, legend, or fable. They necessitate we deal with recorded history.

Pontius Pilate was **the fifth governor of the Roman province of Judaea**, serving under Emperor Tiberius from 26/27 to 36/37. He is the best-attested governor of Judaea. We have many **coins** that he minted while in office. There is a fragmentary short inscription of him in the so-called **Pilate Stone**, which is the only inscription about a Roman governor of Judaea predating the Roman-Jewish Wars. **Josephus**

(*Jewish Wars* and *Antiquities of the Jews*) talks about him, as does **Philo** (*Embassy to Gaius*). He appears in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, and 1 Timothy, as well as in three letters of **Ignatius** (Trallians, Magnesians, and Smyrnaeans), and the Roman historian **Tacitus** mentions him, even telling us “Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus” (*Annals* 15.44). To put it bluntly, it would have been impossible to fabricate a tale that Pilate put Jesus to death if it were not true.

This is what **the suffering in the creeds then leads us to consider. He was crucified, died, and was buried.** Long accounts of this are found in all four Gospels. **Crucifixion** was the ultimate form of torture in the Roman world, perhaps the cruelest method of the death penalty yet then devised. The crucified person spends hours on a splintery, wooden plank, rubbing up and down on it. Often tied, sometimes nailed to it, the method of death is suffocation. But rather than choke quickly, they provided a tiny little seat, angled downward rather than horizontal, just enough that you could pull yourself up to catch your breath, before you fell back down and started to asphyxiate one again. The process

usually took many hours and even days, as you also burned and dehydrated in the hot sun for good measure.

Again, citing **Psalm 2** (vv. 1-2), the **Disciples** lead by Peter and John then pray to God, “Truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and *Pontius Pilate*, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do *whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place*” (**Acts 4:27-28**). What are they talking about, **predestined to take place**?

They are surely citing the many OT Scriptures that speak directly to the event. Isaiah 53 is probably the best known, and to this day it is a passage that gives the Jews no end of grief as they deny their Messiah. Here, the Suffering Servant “**took up our pain and bore our suffering**” (**Isa 53:4**; cf. **Heb 9:28**; **1Pe 2:24**). **Psalm 22** predicts it in many ways. The Law of Moses predicted it saying, “**Cursed is anyone hung on a tree**” (**Deut 21:23**; **Gal 3:13**). Predicting the event himself, Jesus said that the **son of Man must be lifted up** as Moses lifted up the serpent on the pole in the wilderness (**John 3:14**). Indeed, he predicted the whole thing many times before it ever happened (**Matt 16:21**; **Mark 8:31**; **Luke 9:22**; **John 12:34**; etc.).

The creeds say he *died*. There have been many attempts through the centuries to say that Jesus never died at all. The popular yet completely absurd “*swoon*” theory of the 19<sup>th</sup> century said that Jesus was, like the Man in Black in *The Princess Bride*, only mostly dead after this ordeal. But *this is not the claim*. John could not be clearer. “*One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water*” (*John 19:34*). The most probable explanation here is that *the spear pierced Jesus’ heart*, meaning that he was truly dead.<sup>14</sup> Luke is even simpler. “*He breathed his last*” (*Luke 23:46*), even as Isaiah had predicted (*Isa 53:8*).

Because he died, like any Jew of the day, he would be *buried*. And buried he was. Again, Isaiah. “*They made his grave with the wicked*” (*53:9*). The Gospels tell us that *Joseph of Arimathea*, a disciple of Jesus, asked Pilate if he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission (*John 19:38*). *Nicodemus* who was very skeptical of Jesus in John 3 comes and mixes myrrh and aloes to anoint the dead body (*39*). And they *took the body of Jesus* and bound it in linen cloths with the spices and laid him in a *garden tomb* (*40-41*). Then, a great stone was rolled over the

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<sup>14</sup> For example, see *William D. Edwards*, MD; Wesley J. Gabel, MDiv; Floyd E. Hosmer, MS, AMI, “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 256:11 (March 21, 1986): 1455-1463. [https://people.bethel.edu/~pferris/ot103/Jesus\\_Crucifixion.pdf](https://people.bethel.edu/~pferris/ot103/Jesus_Crucifixion.pdf).

entrance (**Matt 27:60**) and Roman centuries guarded it with their life (**65**).

### *He Descended into Hell; on the Third Day Rose Again*

Now, at this point, The Apostles' Creed adds perhaps **the most discussed and disagreed upon line** in all of the creeds (among the orthodox). "**He descended into hell.**" **Heretics** teach this means that Jesus went to hell to be further punished, as if his punishment on the cross and being forsaken by his Father there was not enough. Perhaps in response to this, many Reformed, following Calvin (even though this view was "**virtually unattested**" prior to him and "**entirely novel**" in church history<sup>15</sup>) have said that this only refers to **Jesus' suffering the full range of suffering in this life**, especially on the cross (See especially *Institutes* 2.16.8). It is true that what Jesus suffered on the cross was hellish! But that isn't what it means. Better, some have said it just means **he went to the place of the dead**, which was Sheol in the OT, Hades in Greek.

**But the Creed does not say** that Jesus was *crucified, descended into hell, died, and was buried*. Nor does it say that he

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<sup>15</sup> **Matthew Emerson**, *"He Descended to the Dead": An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: 2019), 99, 100.

was crucified, descended into hell, and was buried. Rather, it says *he was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell.* There is an order to it all. Following the universal view of the early church, this refers to Jesus' descent to the realm of the dead where he proclaimed his victory over the powers of hell and death. As Psalm 24 says, "Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in" (Ps 24:9). What gates? The gates of hell. Jesus had come there to set the prisoner's free (Eph 4:9; cf. Ps 68:18).<sup>16</sup> This is precisely the way Luther takes it in his proof-texts of Eph 4:9-10 and 1 Peter 3:18-20. "Being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits [demons and/or watchers] in prison" (1Pet 3:18-19).

If Jesus descended, then it means he also *ascended*. Technically, we do not speak about the ascent until after the resurrection. However, *the resurrection* was an ascent from the dead, from the underworld, and from the grave. Thus, the creeds continue "On the third day rose again from the dead." The Second Nicene adds, "according to the Scripture." This is exactly what Paul says, "Christ died for our

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<sup>16</sup> And excellent new study of this is Samuel D. Renihan, *Crux, Mors, Inferi: A Primer and Reader on the Descent of Christ*, Independently Published, 2021.

sins *in accordance with the Scriptures*, he was buried, that he was raised on the third day *in accordance with the Scriptures*” (1Cor 15:3-4). In fact, everything in these creeds is in accordance with Scripture; they make nothing up. Even Paul, whose words are Scripture, gets it from the Gospels and their long retelling of that most amazing of days (Matt 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20).

The resurrection of Jesus is *the focal point of all history*. It is the singular event, unduplicated and unparalleled in the world. *Not that no one had risen* from the dead before. We have resurrections in both the OT (2Kgs 4:34) and the NT (Mark 5:41; John 11:44). *What is unique* is that it was 1. *Predicted in the OT* (Gen 22:4; Ps 16:10; Jonah 1:17; Isa 53:10; Hos 6:1-2); 2. *Predicted by Jesus himself* (Matt 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7); and 3. Told that *Jesus would raise himself* from the dead (John 2:19). Only a handful of men have ever been raised from the dead. No man raises himself from the dead. Jesus did. This is such an *omni-important* event that Paul says, “*And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain*” (1Cor 15:14). Nothing is more central to our confession. Nothing is more important in this world, for in this

resurrection, Jesus conquered death itself. Because of it, he may give others life.

## *He Ascended into Heaven and is Seated at the Right Hand of the Father*

The last section then deals with the ascension into heaven. “He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty” (Apostles’ Creed). I believe that the ascension is the least understood and discussed of these events. On one level, it is easy to visualize. As it says in Acts, “And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight” (Acts 1:9). But what does it mean? Why did he do it? We’ll address the second question next time. So what does it mean?

It means that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God the Father. This is a designation for power, rule, and authority. Jesus puts it this way (immediately prior to the ascension), “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt 28:18). All authority where? Only in his kingdom? Only on earth? Peter puts it this way. He “has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him” (1Pet 3:22).

Hebrews puts it this way, “After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs” (Heb 1:3-4). The ascension of Christ into heaven and the Right Hand of the Father is his new authority as the God-*man*, where he is now in the process of fully reconciling heaven and earth, doing all his Father’s will, bringing his people to heaven and preparing a place for them. Nothing Satan or his minions try to do can thwart this authority. As God he always had this authority. As man, he has now retaken the authority that was given to Adam in Eden, who lost it in his sin.

### *From There He Will Come to Judge the Living and the Dead*

The Right Hand of the King takes us to the last statement. The Right Hand is the Military Commander, the one who executes the orders and judgments, carrying out war, dispensing justice. After all, he is “the Lord.” Thus, “From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.” The Second Nicene adds, “He shall come again, with glory” and “whose kingdom shall have no end.”

In one way, this refers to **the judgments and justice that Jesus Christ brings upon this world this very day**. Every time a king, a nation, or an individual is judged, it is at the command of Jesus Christ. Any time someone dies they are judged by him. This is all part of how he brings his kingdom to earth, showing that **his kingdom is omnipotent and that it will continue forever**, long past those of men.

But one day, **he will come again**. This refers to **the Second Coming**. It shall be a coming in great glory and power and pomp, such as the world have never known. When he comes, he will judge all flesh. Luther gives several texts. **“He is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42)**. **“We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (2Cor 5:10)**. This is as Jesus told the people at the end of his great discourse on the End (**Matt 25:31-46**).

## **Saving Faith: Do You Ascent?**

**The material on Jesus** is by far **the longest in the creeds**, and for good reason. Jesus is the mediator between God and man. Get him wrong and you get it all wrong. We have seen

two equally important truths regarding him. He is God. He is man. As God, he is simply God of God. You must ascent to this truth, that is not merely know what it teaches, but **intellectually and morally agree with it**. Do you? Yet, it needs to be added, who really in fact *knows and ascents* to the fact that Trump was the 45<sup>th</sup> President, or that ice melts at 32° Fahrenheit, or that the sky is blue, *but does not actually believe these things*? In this sense, to say that you do not believe in Jesus is to say that you do not really ascent to these truths at all. But how can you not? On what basis? Your eternal destiny hangs in the balance on this question. You'd better have a good answer. **Is there any question more important to ask yourself than this?**

To reinforce this, we have seen that Jesus Christ is **fully man**. These things have taken place *in history*. They are historical claims made by eyewitnesses who ended up each man dying a terrible, brutal martyrs' death to bring you this news. That's how seriously they took it. And they did it gladly. These events really and truly happened in this very world, not in some fantasy novel or fiction drama TV Mini-Series or video game. As such, the whole idea of ascent takes on a powerful import. **These things are true because they happened**. To believe them is deeply justified because they are

not make-believe story-time. All that's left is whether you will believe them.

## The Only God-Man In History

We began by talking about [the Most Interesting Man in the World](#). Those silly anecdotes I started with were from a series of old beer commercials! I thought some of them fit perfectly with Jesus (especially, the beard). But to compare Jesus to a fictional beer commercial guy seems almost blasphemous. In fact, I'm not comparing them at all. I asked, who is the real Most Interesting Man in the World?

The reality is, Jesus is [infinitely more than a man](#), though he is in fact fully and truly a man, just as we are. Jesus is also God. He is the only Person in the universe who possesses these two natures fully. Not even the Father or the Holy Spirit can say this. Jesus is truly unique. I do not tell you to merely find him interesting. I certainly don't tell you these things to peak your intellectual curiosity so that you can play games with it all. I tell you so that you will fall down at his feet and worship him. What else can you do with someone who has no peers, is utterly unique, and who makes our heads spin trying to figure him out?

Believe what you have heard, and it will be counted to you as righteousness. But in case you still wonder what you should believe, here is Dr. Luther to tell you.

*What is meant by this Article?*

*Answer.* I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord; who hath redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, secured and delivered me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with silver and gold, but with his holy and precious blood, and with his innocent sufferings and death; in order that I might be his, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness; even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.

★★★    ★★★

Now that you are done, go back and read the sermon according to the outline I had in my mind when I wrote it:

**Main Outline:**

- A. The Greatest Man in History
- B. Saving Faith: Ascent and Justified True Belief
- C. I Believe in Jesus Christ**
- B'. Saving Faith: Do you Ascent?
- A'. The Only God-Man in History

**Sub-Outline (Under “C. I believe in Jesus Christ”):**

- A. His Only Son Our **Lord**
- B. Who **Came Down** & Was Conceived by the Virgin Mary
- C. Suffered Under Pontius Pilate, Was Crucified, **Died**, and Buried**
- C'. He Descended into Hell; on the Third Day **Rose** Again**
- B'. He **Ascended** into Heaven and is Seated at the Right Hand of the Father
- A'. From There He Will Come to **Judge** the Living and the Dead

## Appendix:

### Luther's Smaller Catechism, The Second Article: Of Redemption

Isa. 53:4–11. Eph. 1:7.

*And in Jesus<sup>1</sup> Christ<sup>2</sup> his only Son<sup>3</sup>, our Lord<sup>4</sup>; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost<sup>5</sup>, born of the Virgin Mary<sup>6</sup>; suffered under Pontius Pilate<sup>7</sup>, was crucified<sup>8</sup>, dead<sup>9</sup>, and buried<sup>10</sup>; He descended into hell<sup>11</sup>; the third day he rose again from the dead<sup>12</sup>; He ascended into heaven<sup>13</sup>, and sitteth on the right hand of God<sup>14</sup> the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.<sup>15</sup>*

*What is meant by this Article?*

*Answer.* I believe that Jesus Christ, true God<sup>1</sup>, begotten of the Father from eternity<sup>2</sup>, and also true man<sup>3</sup>, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord<sup>4</sup>; who hath redeemed<sup>5</sup> me<sup>6</sup>, a lost and condemned creature<sup>7</sup>, secured and delivered<sup>8</sup> me from all sins<sup>9</sup>, from death<sup>10</sup>, and from the power of the devil<sup>11</sup>, not with silver and gold<sup>12</sup>, but with his holy and precious blood<sup>13</sup>, and with his innocent<sup>14</sup> sufferings and death<sup>15</sup>; in order that I might be his<sup>16</sup>, live under him in his kingdom<sup>17</sup>, and serve<sup>18</sup> him in everlasting righteousness<sup>19</sup>, innocence<sup>20</sup>, and blessedness<sup>21</sup>; even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity<sup>22</sup>. This is most certainly true<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. 1:21.

<sup>2</sup> John 1:41.

<sup>3</sup> John 1:18.

<sup>4</sup> John 20:28.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:35.

<sup>6</sup> Matt. 1:23.

<sup>7</sup> Matt. 27:26.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 23:33.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 23:46.

<sup>10</sup> John 19:38–42.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Pet. 3:18–20. Eph. 4:9, 10.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Cor. 15:4. Matt. 28:6.

<sup>13</sup> Acts 1:9–11. Heb. 9:24.

<sup>14</sup> Col. 3:1, 2. Heb. 8:1.

<sup>15</sup> Acts 10:42. Matt. 25:31–46. 2 Cor. 5:10.

<sup>1</sup> John 1:1–3. 1 John 5:20. Col. 2:9.

<sup>2</sup> John 3:16. Heb. 13:8.

<sup>3</sup> John 1:14. Phil. 2:6–8.

<sup>4</sup> Phil. 2:9–11.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 20:28.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Cor. 1:30.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 19:10. Eph. 2:3.

<sup>8</sup> Gal. 3:13.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor. 15:3. 1 John 1:7.

<sup>10</sup> 2 Tim. 1:10. John 5:24.

<sup>11</sup> 1 John 3:8.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Pet. 1:18, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Rev. 5:9.

<sup>14</sup> Heb. 7:26. 1 Pet. 2:22.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Pet. 2:24.

<sup>16</sup> Rom 14:7–9. 2 Cor. 5:15.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Tim. 2:11, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Luke 1:74, 75.

<sup>19</sup> 2 Tim. 2:22.

<sup>20</sup> Tit. 2:11, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Matt. 25:34.

<sup>22</sup> Luke 1:32, 33. Rev. 5:13.

<sup>23</sup> 2 Tim. 2:11.

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