

**"I Believe In Jesus Christ:
Who Suffered Under Pontius Pilate"**
Sermon Series on the Apostles' Creed - #6
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(Mk. 15:1-20)

Introduction.

Have you ever noticed that the only human name other than Jesus which appears in the Apostles' Creed is the name of a Roman governor who agreed to carry out one of the greatest injustices the world has ever seen? I think that is rather odd. Of all the people other than Jesus who shaped the Christian faith, only Pilate, the governor of Judea from 26 to 36 AD, found his way into the Apostles' Creed.

However, I believe it's very important that he should be there! There was a monk by the name of Rufinus of Aquileia who lived in the 5th century in a region of what is now modern-day Italy. He was a historian and a theologian, and he once wrote the following: "Those who handed down the Creed showed great wisdom in emphasizing the actual date at which these things happened, so that there might be no chance of any uncertainty or vagueness upsetting the stability of the tradition."

The reference to Pilate firmly anchors the Apostles' Creed in history. It affirms that we're dealing with a historical event that actually happened – the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The gospel isn't like some fairy tale or myth that happened long, long ago and far, far away. The central event of the gospel story happened in a definite place at a definite time, and particular people were involved in putting Him to death.

This morning as we consider the phrase, "I believe in Jesus Christ: who suffered under Pontius Pilate," I want to focus on the word "suffer." And there are three aspects of Jesus' suffering I want you to consider with me briefly today: 1) the physical suffering of Jesus; 2) the spiritual suffering of Jesus; and 3) the reason for the suffering of Jesus.

I. The Physical Suffering of Christ.

It was the land of Palestine, and the Roman Empire was in full control of the tiny province of Judea. In order to maintain its oppressive rule, the Roman government meted out execution by crucifixion which demonstrated the authority and power of Rome and kept its subject peoples under its thumb. The cruelty of

this form of capital punishment lay in the public shame that was involved as well as its slow physical torture.

In the gospels we read that following the verdict of condemnation Jesus was scourged, because scourging was always a prelude to crucifixion (Mk. 15:15). There were few ordeals more terrible than Roman scourging. The victim was stripped, and he was either tied to a pillar in a bent position with his back exposed so that he could not move, or he was stretched rigid upon a frame. The scourge was made of leather thongs studded with pellets of lead or iron and pieces of bone. It literally ripped a person's back to pieces. Many passed out under the lash.

The criminal was then handed over to the soldiers that they might make sport of Him (Mk. 15:16-20). In the case of Jesus, they made Him a crown of thorns and gave Jesus a reed for a scepter and an old purple cloak for a robe, and they mocked Him as a king and a prophet.

Then Jesus began the procession to Calvary. The procession always followed the same pattern. The criminal was placed in a hollow square of four Roman soldiers. In front walked a herald carrying a board whitened with gypsum with the charge painted in black letters. In the case of Jesus it read: "This is Jesus; King of the Jews." The criminal was taken to the place of crucifixion by the longest possible way, on the busiest streets, and through as many of them as possible, so that it might serve as a warning to anyone who might be contemplating a crime. As he went, the victim was beaten and goaded on his way.

The criminal was compelled to carry at least part of his own cross to the place of execution. The upright beam of the cross was called the *stripes*, and the cross-beam was called the *patibulum*. If there was a regular place of crucifixion, such as at Golgotha, the upright beam usually stood there ready in its socket, and it was the cross-beam, the *patibulum*, which the prisoner was forced to carry.

In the rest of Mark 15 we learn that the exhausting experience of the night of trials and examinations, and the terrible torture of the scourging, had left Jesus so weak that He staggered and fell under the weight of the beam. Simon of Cyrene, no doubt a pilgrim to the Passover from North Africa, had the grim experience of being unexpectedly forced into Roman service and carry the cross of Christ.

When the place of crucifixion was reached, the criminal was stripped of his clothing. The cross was laid flat on the ground, and the person was then laid on top of it. The victim was fastened to the cross either with cords or iron nails – the nails being driven through the hands or the wrist and the feet. Then the cross-beam was raised and fixed so that the victim's feet were off the ground, but not that high off the ground. The shoulders and torso were sometimes bound to the cross so as to limit the crucified person's movement even more so. On some occasions the cross formed a capital T.

Midway up the vertical beam there was a horn-like projection called the *sedile*. The criminal would straddle this so as to take some of the weight off the body and prevent the flesh from tearing away from the nails. Affixed to the cross, the person could not care for his bodily needs, and he was the object of taunts and ridicule from passersby.

With respect to the cause of death, the execution actually damaged no vital part of the body. Rather, death came slowly, sometimes after several days, as the result of fatigue, cramped muscles, thirst, and ultimately suffocation. Eventually the crucified person was too exhausted to lift himself up so as to allow air into his lungs, and as Mark 15:37 says, "*He breathed His last.*"

One commentator has said that execution by crucifixion "represented the acme of the torturer's art: atrocious physical sufferings, length of torment, ignominy, and the effect of the crowd gathered to witness the long agony of the crucified. Nothing could be more horrible than the sight of this living body, breathing, seeing, hearing, still able to feel, and yet reduced to the state of a corpse by forced immobility and absolute helplessness."¹

Such was the physical suffering that Jesus endured under Pontius Pilate. But the physical pain that Jesus experienced was not the worst aspect of His suffering. No, the spiritual suffering was an even greater one.

II. The Spiritual Suffering of Christ.

Beginning at Mark 15:33 we read that, "*At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land, and at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?'"* This saying of Jesus from the cross is one of the most difficult to interpret. It's a quotation of the first verse of Psalm 22, which is a great Messianic psalm. In that psalm it is an urgent appeal to God to intervene on behalf of the righteous sufferer. Jesus was living out the situation described in this eschatological psalm of suffering as He hung on the cross of Calvary.

Some people have tried to cushion the power of this passionate outburst arguing that by quoting the first verse of the psalm, Jesus was implying the entire psalm which ends on a note of triumph and devotion. They say that Jesus' words are actually an affirmation of faith that looks beyond the despair and tragedy of the cross. But I believe that the sharp edge of these words must not be blunted. Jesus' cry of dereliction is the inevitable sequel to the horror He experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane.

On the cross Jesus offered Himself to bear the judgment of God upon human rebellion. He who had totally lived with and for the Father experienced the full alienation from God the Father which the judgment He assumed entailed. His cry

expresses the profound horror of separation from God, and the darkness that covered the land declared the same truth.

This cry of dereliction told of the unfathomable pain of real abandonment by the Father, who turned His back on the Son. It is like the cry of a baby from the city of Sparta in ancient Greece who has been taken out to the rugged countryside and left to die in the elements because the child was unacceptable. The abandonment is total.

The sinless Son of God died the sinner's death, and He experienced the bitterness of desolation. This was the cost of "*providing a ransom for the many*" (Mk. 10:45). The cry of Jesus has the ruthless authenticity which provides the assurance that the price of sin had been paid in full.

1 Corinthians 5:21 says that "*God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us.*" Isaiah 53:5 says, "*Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed His stricken, smitten of God and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities, and the chastisement of us all was laid upon Him.*"

It is the suffering of Jesus that fills the incarnation with its deepest meaning. This Jesus died on the cross not for any wrong He committed, but for the wrongs you and I committed. All the sin of the elect and the punishment that we deserve was poured out on Jesus, and He was completely abandoned by the Father at that moment and in that time. And He felt the wrath of God that you and I deserve cutting profoundly deep.

III. The Reason for the Suffering of Christ.

Some secular people concentrate all their attention on the life and teachings of Jesus. Such people often view Jesus' death as an unfortunate and tragic end to the life of a courageous rebel who dared to challenge the religious and political establishment of his day. But the Apostles' Creed leaves no doubt as to how the early church understood all this. The Creed, after affirming that Jesus Christ was God's only-begotten Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the virgin Mary, omits any reference to His life and teachings. It completely skips over all of them to His suffering, His death, and His resurrection. Between the record of Jesus' birth and the account of His death there is only a comma. Why is that?

The silence of the Creed on the life and teachings of Jesus doesn't indicate that the apostles were blind to the amazing qualities of His character or that they were deaf to His remarkable teachings. Rather, it indicates that what Jesus taught and the things He did were not the central focus of His mission to and for the world. The primary mission of Jesus was the cross and His suffering on our behalf. His teachings and His miracles were what happened on the way to Calvary. Simply put, Jesus came to the world in order to save sinners. He came to die for you and me.

In case you think that is too narrow a reading of the primary mission of Jesus' life and ministry, let me remind you that when Christ began His ministry John the Baptist announced to those assembled on the banks of the Jordan River, "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who comes to take away the sins of the world*" (John 1:29). And when the apostles preached the gospel at Pentecost and when they traveled throughout the world proclaiming the Good News, their message centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus, not His life and teaching, and not His miracles.

Indeed, the apostle Paul wrote, "*I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified*" (1Cor. 2:2). In the Apostles' Creed we read nothing about the Sermon on the Mount, or His healing of the sick, or the raising of Lazarus from the dead, or feeding the 5,000. Not a word. Why? Because the central focus of Jesus' ministry and mission was His death, not His life.

In my library I have the two-volume biography of George Whitefield, *The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival*, by Arnold Dallimore. It is a wonderful biography that tells the story of the remarkable life of one of the greatest evangelists in history who set the world on fire with his preaching. All told Dallimore wrote over 1,200 pages on the life of Whitefield. However, of those 1,200 pages only 4 are devoted to Whitefield's death when he died in the home of an old friend in Newburyport, MA, on September 30, 1770. 1,200 pages on the life of this great man and only 4 are devoted to his death.

Now, contrast that with the Gospel record of the death of Jesus Christ. The synoptic Gospels devote nearly a third of their length to the climatic last week of Jesus' life, and fully one half of John's gospel is about the events surrounding the death of Christ. One commentator said that the Gospels are a record of Jesus' final week with increasingly longer introductions! Only two of the Gospels mention the events of Jesus' birth, and all four offer only a few pages on His resurrection. But each Gospel writer gives a detailed account of the events leading up to and including Jesus' death. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John saw the death of Christ as *the* central message of His life and ministry and mission.

Forgiveness of sin is a costly business. It demanded the suffering and death of the Son of God for you and for me. The sufferings of Christ on the cross were not accidental or pointless. Rather, they were the mysterious and wonderful means by which God accomplished our salvation and how He brought about the reconciliation of all things in the world to Himself. This was the reason for His suffering.

Conclusion.

As we look back over the span of the last century, we have witnessed horrors of human suffering previously unimagined. Whether it has been suffering in the trenches of World War I, the extermination of Jews in the death camps of Nazi Germany, the ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and Croatia, or the tragic school shootings that have taken place all across our country, we have been shocked and saddened at the suffering we have seen and experienced. A movement known as Protest Atheism grew up in response to these developments in the world. It declared, "We cannot believe in a God who stays safely in his heaven while all this suffering goes on. We cannot take that sort of God seriously. If he doesn't know what it is like to suffer, he cannot know anything about us."²

As we have seen this morning, the gospel declares that God does indeed know what it's like to suffer. He was intimately involved with our pain and misery. The Apostles' Creed boldly declares that God subjected Himself to the worst evil and pain this world had to offer in the awful events which took place on Calvary, and Jesus bore the brunt of terrible human brutality Himself. God suffered in Christ Jesus, and in a unique and holy way He took upon Himself the pain and suffering of the world He created.

Jesus knows what it's like to be rejected. He knows what it's like to feel pain. And He knows what it's like to suffer death and bear the punishment of sin. And that is why the writer to the Hebrews says, "*For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weakness, but one who has been tempted in all things as we, yet without sin. Therefore, let us draw near to the throne of mercy that we might find grace to help in our time of need*" (Heb. 4:15,16). Augustine once wrote, "God had only one Son without sin, but never did He have a child without suffering."

Where are you suffering today? What pain of body or soul are you experiencing at this hour? Know that Jesus is with you and He is for you. And because of His great love, He went to the cross for you. He suffered for you, and He will walk through whatever valley of suffering you have to travel as your faithful companion all the way. Take His nail-scarred hand into yours and hold onto it tightly and say, "I believe in Jesus Christ who suffered for me." Amen.

¹Reville; source unknown.

²Cited by Alister McGrath in *I Believe: Exploring the Apostles' Creed*, p. 58.