

# **The Apostles' Creed**

**He Suffered Under Pontius Pilate**

*Selected Texts*

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July 18, 2004

# He Suffered Under Pontius Pilate

## Introduction

As we continue our series in *The Apostles' Creed* I would like to examine today what it means that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate. Please listen as I recite the Apostles' Creed:

*I believe in God the Father Almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth.*

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
and born of the Virgin Mary.  
**He suffered under Pontius Pilate,**  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended into 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.*

Artist William Holman Hunt spent 1870-73 in the Holy Land, where he painted *Shadow of Death*. The work depicts a carpenter's shop in Nazareth. Jesus is standing by a wooden trestle on which he has put his saw. Lifting his eyes toward heaven, Jesus stretches and raises both arms above his head. The evening sunlight streaming through the open door casts a dark shadow in

the form of a cross on the wall behind him, making his tool rack appear as a horizontal bar on which his hands have been fastened. The tools themselves look like the fateful hammer and nails.

Though the idea came from an artist's imagination, it is accurate. From Jesus' youth, the cross cast its shadow over him. Jesus was born to die. In fact, Jesus' life was a life of suffering.

## Lesson

We come today to the article in the Apostles' Creed in which we affirm our faith in Jesus Christ who *suffered under Pontius Pilate*. I would like to examine the meaning of this article by simply dividing it into two. First, let's look at, "He suffered." And second, let's look at, "under Pontius Pilate."

### I. He Suffered

First, he suffered.

Several questions come to mind as we examine the suffering of Jesus Christ.

#### A. *Who Suffered?*

First, who suffered?

Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity is the one who suffered. It was not the Father who suffered. Nor was it the Holy Spirit who suffered. No. It was Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity who suffered.

#### B. *How Did Christ Suffer?*

Second, how did Christ suffer?

Jesus Christ suffered in body and soul.

There was a time when attention was fixed exclusively on the bodily suffering of Christ.

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Later on it became customary to minimize the bodily suffering of Christ, since it was felt that sin, being of a spiritual nature, could only be atoned for by purely spiritual suffering.

These one-sided views are both wrong. Jesus Christ suffered in body and soul for sin, and he bore the punishment for sin in both body and soul.

### *C. What Did Christ Suffer?*

Third, what did Christ suffer?

Christ sustained in body and soul the anger of God against the sin of the whole human race.

God, who is holy, hates sin. Romans 1:18 says, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness."

We have a popular view in many of our churches today that says that "God hates the sin but loves the sinner." The truth is that God not only hates sin, he in fact hates the sinner too. These are strong words, but this is what the Scriptures teach.

For example, Psalm 5:4-5 says: "You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell. The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong." God does not simply hate wrongdoing; he hates "all who do wrong."

John 3:36 says: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." Notice that God's wrath does not remain on sin; it in fact remains the sinner.

Jesus suffered the wrath of God, which was directed, not merely toward sin, but, toward sinners.

### *D. When Did Christ Suffer?*

Fourth, when did Christ suffer?

Christ suffered during his entire life on earth, but especially at the end.

Christ suffered at the start of his life by taking the very nature of a servant and being made in human likeness (Philippians 2:7).

He suffered in his private life by taking up residence with a family living under oppression and in obscurity.

He suffered in his public life by engaging in conflict with his enemies.

And he suffered at the end of his life by dying on a cross for sin that was not his own.

*E. Why Did Christ Suffer?*

Fifth, why did Christ suffer?

Christ suffered so that he might reconcile us to God.

Question 37 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks, “What do you understand by the word ‘suffered’?”

And the answer given is: “That during his whole life on earth, but especially at the end, Christ sustained in body and soul the anger of God against the sin of the whole human race. This he did in order that, by his suffering as the only atoning sacrifice, he might set us free, body and soul, from eternal condemnation, and gain for us God’s grace, righteousness, and eternal life.”

Christ brought about our reconciliation with God by his suffering, as is evident in numerous passages of Scripture, such as Romans 5:10: “When we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son” (cf. also 2 Corinthians 5:18-19; Colossians 1:19-20).

*F. For Whom Did Christ Suffer?*

And sixth, for whom did Christ suffer?

We could also ask this question another way. Did Christ die for all people? Or did Christ die only for his elect?

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The Scripture states that Christ suffered and died only for his people, the church, the elect of God. This teaching is upheld by passages which indicate to us that Christ suffered for his “sheep,” his “church,” and his “people.” All the passages in which these terms are used demonstrate the distinguishing love of Christ towards his sheep for whom he laid down his life, towards the church which he purchased with his own blood, and towards his people for whom he gave himself.

For example, look at John 10:15: “Just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.”

Ephesians 5:25 says, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

And Acts 20:28 says, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”

In his book titled *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* John Owen, the greatest of all English theologians, argues in the following manner for Christ dying *only* for his elect, which in theology is called *limited* or *definite atonement*. This is a closely reasoned argument, so please pay attention as I read it to you:

The Father imposed His wrath due unto, and the Son underwent punishment for, either:

All the sins of all men.

All the sins of some men, or

Some of the sins of all men.

In which case it may be said:

That if the last be true, all men have some sins to answer for, and so none are saved.

That if the second be true, then Christ, in their stead suffered for all the sins of all the elect in the whole world, and this is the truth.

But if the first be the case, why are not all men free from the punishment due unto their sins?

You answer, Because of unbelief. I ask, Is this unbelief a sin, or is it not? If it be, then Christ suffered the punishment due

unto it, or He did not. If He did, why must that hinder them more than their other sins for which He died? If He did not, He did not die for all their sins!<sup>1</sup>

So, what we have is that Jesus Christ suffered. He suffered in body and soul. He suffered during his entire life on earth, but especially toward the end of his life. The reason Jesus suffered was to reconcile us to God. And finally, Jesus suffered and died only for his people, the church, the elect of God.

## II. Under Pontius Pilate

Next, let's examine the second part of the phrase in the Apostles' Creed, namely, that Jesus Christ suffered "under Pontius Pilate."

Two questions come to mind as we examine the suffering of Christ "under Pontius Pilate."

### A. *Why a Name?*

First, why a name?

Why did the authors of the Apostles' Creed insert a name at this point? Why did they not simply say, "*He suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried.*"

The reason for the insertion of a name is to affirm that Christ was a person who existed in history.

Not only that, but that he suffered at a particular point in history.

Many Old Testament prophecies pointed to the coming of Messiah. Some of the prophecies even specified the kind of historical setting into which the Messiah would be born. So, it was important to the authors of Apostles' Creed to affirm that Christ came in history during the reign of Pilate.

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<sup>1</sup> John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), 61-61.

*B. Why Pontius Pilate?*

And second, why Pontius Pilate?

We might well ask why the authors of the Apostles' Creed said that Christ suffered "under Pontius Pilate" rather than, say, "under Herod" or "under Caiaphas"? Giving the name of Herod or Caiaphas or any other historical figure from the time of Christ would equally well fix the date of Christ's suffering on earth.

The reason the name Pontius Pilate is mentioned is because it is theologically important.

After Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, he was taken first to Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Annas questioned him, then sent him to Caiaphas for further questioning. After Caiaphas, Jesus was taken to Pilate, the Roman Governor.

Now Pilate, according to historians at the time, was a corrupt governor. Philo says that "he was a man of an inflexible and severe disposition." Luke seems to suggest that Pilate was cruel too, for he tells us in Luke 13:1: "Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices."

Interestingly, Pilate seems to have wanted nothing to do with Jesus. He tried to hand him back to Jewish leaders but they accused Pilate of not being loyal to Caesar. I suppose this scared him into action, the action that the Jewish leaders wanted, and he condemned Jesus to die.

Had the trial ended where it began, before the high priest and the Jewish council, it would not have resulted in the death penalty. It could not because the Jews could not impose the death sentence at that time. You see, the Jews—who wanted Jesus dead—had no power to impose the death penalty upon him. Only Pilate could do that.

Furthermore, Jesus had to die on a cross. Galatians 3:13 says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse



for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree’” (cf. Deuteronomy 21:23).

According to God’s law, a person who was under God’s curse and condemnation was to be hung on a tree.

Jewish methods of putting condemned people to death were usually by stoning or hanging. Only Romans crucified people on a cross.

And so Jesus had to be sentenced by a Roman—by Pontius Pilate—because only the Roman death sentence would bring Christ under God’s curse.

So that is why Christ is said to have suffered “under Pontius Pilate.” It is to secure his suffering in a historical context, but more importantly to ensure that Christ would die on a cross, and thereby seen to be under God’s curse.

We should be clear in pointing out that Jesus Christ is completely innocent of all wrongdoing.

The curse he suffered was not for his own sin but for ours.

### **Conclusion**

Everything that Christ suffered, then, was for our salvation. Let us apply this knowledge to our situation.

#### *A. Christ Suffered Because of Our Sin*

First, Christ suffered because of our sin.

The reason Christ suffered was because of our sin. All of our rebellion against God, our hatred, our anger, our bitterness, our pride, our self-sufficiency, our adultery, our unbelief, our lust, our immorality, our deceit, our theft, and our Sabbath-breaking brought suffering on Christ.

We need to be very clear that Christ did not suffer because he did anything wrong. He did not. He suffered because of your sin and my sin.

*B. Christ Suffered to Secure Our Deliverance*

Second, Christ suffered to secure our deliverance.

We deserved the wrath of God because of our sin. And yet Christ came and bore the wrath of God on our behalf. Christ said, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

Christ suffered in our place so that we might be free from the tyranny of sin and Satan. He not only removed God's wrath from us, but actually turned his wrath into love. By suffering for us Christ has spared us from hell. All of the blessings and benefits we enjoy today are because of Christ's suffering on our behalf.

*C. Christ's Suffered to Procure Our Gratitude*

And finally, Christ suffered to procure our gratitude.

Our response to Christ's suffering should be one of gratitude. How we should thank him for suffering on our behalf! It is only because of what Christ has done by his suffering that we have a hope for eternity.

But not only a hope for eternity, it is only because of what Christ has done by his suffering that we have a hope for today!

Christ's suffering was followed by his resurrection, ascension, and the sending of the Holy Spirit. We have the Holy Spirit indwelling us, thereby enabling us to obey Christ and follow him.

God is so gracious to us. Even though we do not deserve his grace, he nevertheless sent his Son to suffer on our behalf. So that we who were his enemies might now be reconciled to him. Let us thank God for the grace he has shown to us in sending to us and for us Christ who *suffered under Pontius Pilate*. Amen.

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