

HE SUFFERED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE

The Apostles' Creed – Week 5

By Andy Manning

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The mission of the church is to make disciples; to help people become fully-devoted followers of Jesus Christ (Mt 28:19-20). To do this, the church must teach people what to believe and how to behave. This, of course, means teaching people the Bible. But that can be a daunting task, since the Bible is such a huge book. Therefore, ever since the beginning of Christianity, Christians have used creeds to teach people. A creed is a short summary of the Christian faith. The oldest of the creeds is the Apostles' Creed, dating all the way back to the second century. For almost two-thousand years Christians have been teaching, memorizing, and reciting the Apostles' Creed. And right now at Church Acadiana we are studying the Creed line by line as sort of a syllabus or outline to learn the essential teachings of Christianity.
2. Let's begin by reading it together. (This version of the Apostles' Creed comes from the website of the Episcopal Church.) "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 to the dead. 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 saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen."
3. This week we are going to look at the words of the Creed, "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead." This part of the creed is all about the death of Christ.
4. The book of Revelation calls Jesus the king of kings and Lord of lords (Rev 19:16). But Jesus did not come to earth to sit on a throne and live a life of luxury and comfort. He came to suffer and die. He specifically said that was purpose He came to earth (Mk 10:45). He predicted His death

multiple times (Mt 16:21). When He started His ministry, He knew where God was leading Him – to the cross.

5. In this sermon we are going learn about the death of Christ by addressing four questions.

II. FOUR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE DEATH OF CHRIST

1. Who killed Jesus?

- i. There are several answers to this question.
- ii. First, Jesus was betrayed by one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot.
 1. One day when Jesus was reclining in the house of Simon the Leper, Mary (Martha's and Lazarus' sister) poured out a pound of expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped it off with her hair. Judas threw a fit. He said, "What a waste! This perfume could have been sold for a small fortune and the money given to the poor!" But Judas wasn't concerned about the poor. He held the money for Jesus' ministry, and he stole from it. He wanted the money for himself. But Jesus didn't agree with Judas. He defended Mary, saying that she had done a good thing (Jn 12:1-8). That was the last straw for Judas.
 2. **Matthew 26:14-16** 14 Then one of the Twelve, the man called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests 15 and said, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" So they weighed out thirty pieces of silver for him. 16 And from that time he started looking for a good opportunity to betray him.
 3. After the Last Supper, Judas led a large mob with swords and clubs to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus and the disciples were praying. Judas told them, "Jesus is the one I kiss." Judas approached Jesus and kissed Him, and they arrested Him (Mt 26:47-50). In the end, however, Judas wouldn't get to enjoy his blood money. After betraying he Christ he felt so guilty that he returned the money and then hung himself (Mt 27:3).
- iii. Second, Jesus was condemned to death by the Jewish religious leaders.

1. These were the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and chief priests. Why did they want to kill Jesus? For one, they envied Jesus (Mt 27:18). They hated Jesus because the people respected Him more than them. They also wanted to kill Jesus for breaking the Sabbath. He didn't truly break the Sabbath, but He healed a man on the Sabbath, so they wanted to kill him (Mt 12:14). They also wanted to kill Jesus for claiming to be God. When Jesus referred to Himself as the Son of God, they knew He was making Himself equal to God, so they wanted to kill Him (Jn 5:18). On one occasion Jesus said, "I and the Father are one," so they picked up stones to kill him, but He was able to get away (Jn 10:30-31). Another reason they wanted to kill Jesus was that they saw how many people were following Jesus, and they were afraid that He would start a rebellion against Rome which would cause Rome to come in and destroy the nation (Jn 11:47-48). So when Judas offered to betray Jesus, they were glad to have the help (Mk 14:11). After Jesus was arrested, they brought Him to the house of Caiphas, the high priest, where the scribes and elders had convened. There they sentenced Him to death (Mt 26:64-66). They spat in His face and beat Him. They slapped Him and said, "Prophecy to us, Messiah! Who was it that hit you (Mt 26:67)?" That leads us to Pontius Pilate.

iv. Third, Jesus was sentenced to death by Pontius Pilate.

1. During the time of Jesus, Palestine was under Roman occupation. As long as they paid their taxes and kept the peace, the Romans allowed the Jews to rule themselves for the most part. But the Jewish leaders (the Sanhedrin) were not allowed to carry out capital punishment. For that they needed the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate. So they brought Jesus to Pilate and asked him to condemn Jesus to death (Mt 27:2).
2. Pilate's story is very interesting. He knew that Jesus was innocent and didn't want to kill him (Lk 23:4, 13-16).

- a. He repeatedly tried to get the Jews to handle the matter themselves (Jn 18:31; 19:6).
 - b. Jn 19:12 says he kept trying to release Jesus.
 - c. He knew that Jesus was no real threat to Rome, and that the Jewish leaders were just jealous of Jesus (Mt 27:18).
 - d. His wife had a terrible dream about Jesus and told him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man (Mt 27:19)."
 - e. He tried to get Herod to make the final decision because Jesus was from Galilee, and Herod was the king of Galilee, but Herod just sent Jesus back to Pilate (Lk 23:6-12).
 - f. Then, he tried something else. This was all going on during the Passover festival, and every year at the festival Pilate's custom to release to the crowd a prisoner they wanted. So, Pilate offered the Jews a choice – Jesus, or a notorious prisoner named Barabbas. But the crowd shouted, "Barabbas (Mt 27:15-22)!"
 - g. Finally, Pilate tried one more thing. In Matthew and Mark it seems like Jesus was flogged after Pilate condemned Him, but in Luke and John it shows that Pilate actually had Jesus flogged first, in hopes that this would satisfy the Jews and allow Jesus to go free, but to no avail (Lk 23:22; Jn 19:1-5).
 - h. Finally, Pilate gave up. He washed his hands in front of the crowd, and said, "I am innocent of this man's blood. See to it yourselves (Mt 27:24)!" And he handed Jesus over to be crucified.
3. Why did Pilate sentence Jesus to death?
- a. Selfishness. He wanted to retain power. He thought it was the only way to save his job.
 - b. **William Barclay** said, "Pilate ordered the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, for no other reason

than that he could see no other way to remain procurator of Judea.”

- c. Historians tell us that Pilate was on thin ice with the Roman emperor Tiberius for three reasons.
 - i. First, he marched his troops into Jerusalem carrying the Roman standards. These were small metal images of the Emperor Tiberius, who was officially a god. No governor had ever done this before. The Jews thought this was idolatry, and demanded that they standards be removed from the city. Pilate threatened to kill them, but they persisted. Finally Pilate gave in.
 - ii. Second, in his palace he hung some gold-plated shields that had the names of the Roman gods. Again, the Jews saw this as idolatry and demanded that he get rid of them, but he refused. This time they took their protest to the emperor, and he ordered Pilate to remove them.
 - iii. Finally, he decided to improve the water supply in Jerusalem, but he wanted to finance it by taking money from the Jewish temple. There were immediate riots, which Pilate suppressed with exaggerated harshness. The emperor didn't like riots and unrest.
- d. So, when the Jews asked Pilate to crucify Jesus they threatened him.
- e. **John 19:12** “If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend. Anyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar!”
- f. In other words, they accused Jesus of political insurrection. Of claiming to be a king, and threatening the Pax Romana. And if Pilate didn't execute Jesus, they were going to report him to

Tiberius the Emperor. Pilate caved and sentenced Jesus to death.

- v. Fourth, Jesus was killed by the Roman soldiers.
 - 1. They were the ones who actually flogged Jesus, nailed Him to the cross, and thrust the spear in His side.
 - 2. Notice what Peter said in a sermon to the Jews.
 - 3. **Acts 2:23** “you used lawless people to nail him to a cross and kill him.”
 - 4. The Roman soldiers were the “lawless” people Peter was referring to.
- vi. Fifth, Jesus was killed by you.
 - 1. **Isaiah 53:5** But he was pierced because of our rebellion, crushed because of our iniquities
 - 2. While you didn’t sentence Christ to die, and you didn’t nail His hands to the cross, your sins are the reason He died. He died for your sins. If there was no sin, there would be no reason for Christ to die.
- vii. Sixth, God sent Jesus to be killed.
 - 1. **Acts 2:23** Though he was delivered up according to God’s determined plan and foreknowledge, you used lawless people to nail him to a cross and kill him. (See also Acts 4:27-28.)
 - 2. God didn’t kill Jesus, but it was His plan to use the murder of Christ for the salvation of men. In other words, Christ’s death was a tragedy, it was unjust, it was evil, but it was part of God’s plan all along.
- viii. Seventh, Christ allowed Himself to be killed.
 - 1. **John 10:17-18** 17 This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life so that I may take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have the right to lay it down, and I have the right to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.
 - 2. Jesus didn’t commit suicide, but He allowed Himself to be killed. He willingly died. God the Father did not force God the Son to die. He didn’t commit filicide (the deliberate act

of a parent killing their own child). Jesus willingly gave His life.

3. On the night before His crucifixion, Christ repeatedly prayed, Jesus repeatedly asked God to save Him from the cross (Mt 26:36-46). Being truly human, Jesus did not want to endure the suffering of the cross. However, He wanted to do the will of His Father, and He wanted to save mankind, so He allowed Himself to be killed.

2. How did Jesus die?

- i. Jesus was killed by crucifixion.
- ii. **Mark 15:20** “They led him out to crucify him.”
- iii. Crucifixion was the dominant form of capital punishment by the Romans. It would be similar to the electric chair or lethal injection today. But crucifixion was so much worse.
- iv. Commentator **William Barclay** wrote, “There was no more terrible death than death by crucifixion.”
- v. The Roman statesman **Cicero** called it “the most cruel and horrifying death.”
- vi. The Roman historian **Tacitus** described it as a “despicable death.”
- vii. The Romans called the cross “the unhappy wood” or “the unhappy tree.”
- viii. Crucifixion was so terrible that Rome wouldn’t even use it on its own citizens. It was only used on slaves and non-citizens who were the worst criminals.
- ix. First, the Romans flogged (severely whipped) Jesus (Mt 27:26). In a typical Roman flogging, the criminal was tied to a post with his arms and hands tied up over his head to fully expose his entire backside – back, shoulders, buttocks, and legs. The whipping would usually last for 39 lashes, but sometimes more, depending on the mood of the soldiers. The special whip had several names: cat of nine tails; flagellum; flagrum; scorpion. It had nine braided leather strands with heavy metal balls woven into them. Whipping would create deep bruises which would eventually bust open as the flogging went on. The whip also had pieces of sharp bone, metal, or bronze woven into the strands. These would dig

into the flesh as the whip hit the body, and then rip off flesh and cause deep cuts to the bone as the whip was pulled back. Flogging would lead to massive blood loss.

- x. After the flogging the soldiers stripped Him naked and mocked Him by putting Him in a purple robe (the color of royalty) and placing a crown of thorns on his head (Mk 15:17). This crown was made from the long spikes (up to twelve inches) of a date palm. They knelt down before Him and mocked Him: “Hail, king of the Jews!” Then they repeatedly hit Him on the head with a stick, spat on Him, and insulted Him. Then they put His own clothes back on Him and led Him away to be crucified (Mt 27:27-31; Mk 15:19).
- xi. Then Jesus was forced to carry the cross from Jerusalem to Golgotha, a hill outside the city (Jn 19:17). Golgotha means Place of the Skull (Jn 19:17). The Latin word for Golgotha is Calvary.
- xii. There are several things that you need to know about this walk.
 - 1. First, Jesus likely only had to carry the crossbeam (patibulum), since the vertical beam (stipe) was usually already at the crucifixion site. Still, the crossbeam could weigh between 100-200 pounds.
 - 2. Second, Jesus had to carry the cross after His flogging, when the usual custom was to flog the criminal at the site of the crucifixion.
 - 3. Third, on the way to the execution site, the criminal would be led through as many streets as possible. This was done to warn the people of the consequences of crime against the Roman government.
 - 4. Fourth, the flogging would usually continue all the way to the crucifixion site. All this helps to explain why Jesus needed help carrying the cross. At first he carried the cross by Himself, but eventually He could go no further, so the Romans forced a man named Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross for Him (Jn 19:17; Mk 15:21).
 - 5. One more thing about the walk to Golgotha. We know that Pilate had a sign made to be placed above Christ’s head on

the cross (Jn 19:19). This was typical of Roman crucifixions. The sign would usually have the criminal's name written on it, along with the crime. Jesus' sign read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." As Jesus carried His cross He would have either worn the sign around His neck, or it would have been carried by a soldier walking in front of the criminal.

6. The path that Jesus is believed to take from Jerusalem to Golgotha is called Via Dolorosa, which means "Way of Sorrow."

- xiii. When He reached Golgotha, He was stripped naked again, and the soldiers cast lots for His clothes (Jn 19:23).
- xiv. Then Jesus' hands and feet were nailed to the cross (Jn 20:25).
- xv. He was crucified between two criminals (Mk 15:27).
- xvi. As He hung on the cross, people yelled insults at Him and mocked Him (Mt 27:29-44).
- xvii. He was crucified at 9 am (Mk 15:25).
- xviii. From 12-3 pm darkness came over the whole land (Mt 27:45).
- xix. At 3 pm Jesus said His last words. **John 19:30** "It is finished." He hung on the cross for six hours, and then He died.
- xx. Since the Jews wanted the bodies taken down and buried before sundown, the Roman soldiers broke the legs of the two men crucified beside Jesus. But when they came to Jesus, they didn't break His legs because He was already dead. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and blood and water came out (Jn 19:31-37).

3. Why did Jesus die?

- i. Much more could be said about the details surrounding Christ's death, but for the sake of time we need to move on to the meaning of His death. The significance of His death. Why did Jesus die?
- ii. This question can be answered with one word: propitiation.
- iii. **1 John 2:2** He [Jesus Christ] himself is the atoning sacrifice (or the propitiation) for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for those of the whole world.

- iv. JI Packer calls “propitiation” “the nucleus and focal point of the whole New Testament view of the saving work of Christ. He also said that the best summary of the gospel is “adoption through propitiation.”
- v. To propitiate is to quench or satisfy or remove God’s wrath against us.
- vi. God’s wrath can be summarized with two words: revulsion and retribution. The wrath of God is His revulsion (i.e., feeling of hatred, disgust, and horror) toward sin, and righteous retribution for sin. In other words, God’s wrath is His hatred for sin and His determination to punish it.
- vii. **Romans 1:18** For God’s wrath is revealed from heaven against all godlessness and unrighteousness of people who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth
- viii. Everyone who sins against God is the object and target of His wrath.
- ix. **Romans 2:5** Because of your hardened and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath, when God’s righteous judgment is revealed.
- x. Everyone who sins against God has a date with the day of wrath when God will judge them. The next couple of verses reveal that this will be “wrath and anger” and “affliction and distress.” The wrath of God ultimately means that God will send sinners to eternal hell.
- xi. In Romans 3:9-18 Paul makes it very clear that all people are sinful and therefore under God’s wrath.
- xii. And then then in Romans 3:20 Paul says that no can be justified – made right with God – by keeping the law. Why not? Because we’ve already broken the law and deserve wrath. The only way we can escape God’s wrath through the law is by keeping it perfectly. In other words, you are under the wrath of God, headed for hell, and you can’t save yourself.
- xiii. But then in Romans 3:21-22 Paul says that God has a provided a way for us to be made right with God apart from the law, by putting our faith in Jesus Christ.

- xiv. How is this possible?
- xv. **Romans 3:25** God presented him as the mercy seat (or propitiation) by his blood, through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his restraint God passed over the sins previously committed.
- xvi. Because God is righteous and just, He cannot overlook your sin. It must be punished. But God doesn't want to punish you; He wants an eternal relationship with you in heaven. So God sent Jesus to die in your place for your sins, as your substitute. When He died for your sins, He satisfied or quenched God's wrath against you.
- xvii. **Jl Packer** "The 'blood' – that is, the sacrificial death – of Jesus Christ abolished God's anger against us, and ensured that His treatment of us for ever after would be propitious and favorable. Henceforth, instead of showing Himself to be against us, He would show Himself in our life and experience to be for us. What, then, does the phrase 'a propitiation... by His blood' express? It expresses, in the context of Paul's argument, precisely this thought: that by His sacrificial death for our sins Christ pacified the wrath of God." (Packer, *Knowing God*, 165.)
- xviii. Because of Christ's death for your sins, when you put your faith in Him, God forgives you and adopts you in His family as His beloved child, and gives you the promise of eternal life.

4. Did Jesus descend to the dead?

- i. There is one more question that we need to address before moving on from the subject of Christ's death. The Apostles' Creed says, "He descended to the dead." Some versions say, "He descended into hell." What does this mean?
- ii. The first thing you need to know is that this phrase was not included in the earliest versions of the Apostles' Creed. It was first added to the Creed in AD 570 (William Barclay, *The Apostles' Creed*, 98). This is one reason many Christians do not include it in the Creed. For example, theologian Wayne Grudem has a version of the Creed in his systematic theology book that omits it. As well, in my *Home Discipleship Catechism*, I omit it.

- iii. The second thing you need to know is that the actual word used in the creed originally is Hades, not hell. In the Bible Hades, which is Greek, and Sheol, which is Hebrew, refers not to hell, but to the place of the dead. It is not the same as hell. The New Testament word for hell is Gehenna (Mt 5:29-30; Mt 10:28). Gehenna is the place eternal punishment for the wicked. Hades or Sheol can simply refer to the place of the dead.
- iv. The point of this statement, then, is simply to say that Jesus really did die.
- v. William Barclay says that this part of the Creed was written to correct a false teaching called Gnosticism which taught that Jesus did not actually die (Barclay, 95).
- vi. Now, the next question is, what was Jesus doing in the place of the dead? When you die, the Bible says that your spirit immediately goes to heaven. But what was Jesus doing between Friday and Sunday? John Calvin taught that Jesus actually did go to hell to suffer the full penalty of sin on our behalf. But the Bible doesn't teach that, and neither does the Creed, which uses the word Hades and not Gehenna. Unfortunately the Bible doesn't say what Jesus did. The main point of the Creed is that He really did die.

III. CONCLUSION

1. Much more could be said about the death of Christ. The important thing to remember is that He died, and He died for you. He died so that you could be forgiven of your sins and have eternal life. He died because you need a Savior; you can't save yourself. He died because He is your only hope. He died because He loves you.
2. But if you want to be forgiven of your sins and receive eternal life, it's not enough that Christ died. You must believe in Him. You must repent of your sins and have faith in Him.
3. How do you do that? Admit you are a sinner in need of a Savior. Believe that Jesus really did die for your sins. And call out to Jesus in prayer for Him to be your Savior and Lord.