

**The Apostle's Creed:  
I Believe in Jesus Christ who suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, dead and buried**

**Matthew 27:1-2; 22-60**

**By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)**

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Matthew 27. We are continuing our study through the Apostles' Creed and we are now squarely in the center of the portion of the Apostles' Creed that deals with the person and work of Jesus Christ focusing especially on his sufferings and death, and so we read the account of this from Matthew 27. We'll look at the first two verses and then we'll skip down to the 22nd verse and read to verse 60, so let's hear again the story of our Lord's death for us from God's living, inspired and inerrant Word.

Now when morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus to put Him to death; And they bound Him, and led Him away and delivered Him to Pilate the governor. As they were coming out, they found a man of Cyrene named Simon, whom they pressed into service to bear His cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha, which means Place of a Skull, They gave Him wine to drink mixed with gall; and after tasting *it*, He was unwilling to drink.

Amen. This is God's Word; may He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

*Our Lord, it stirs our hearts to hear of the suffering and crucifixion and death of our Savior, Your Son. By Your Spirit, as we study Your Word and this beautiful and ancient summary of it in The Apostles' Creed, help us understand what it means that the blessed Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior of our souls, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Have you ever noticed that the bulk of the gospels are devoted to the last week of Jesus' life? You know, something like a third of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, often called the *synoptic gospels*, are devoted to the last week of Jesus' life. Something like one-half of the gospel of John is devoted to that. Have you ever wondered why?

There is a lot to say about Jesus. John even said if he said everything about Jesus that he could say, it would fill the world with books. Why do they focus on the last week of Jesus' life? Well, there's a reason and at least part of that reason

is that Jesus' last week of His life contained a very, very significant aspect of His ministry. In fact, the central focus of Jesus' life was dying on behalf of His people as the atonement, as the sacrifice, as the propitiation for their sins. And so the gospels rightly focus on the final week of His life in order to highlight to us this central aspect of His work, thus reminding us that Jesus' person and work must be kept together.

And did you notice the last time, perhaps, that you said The Apostles' Creed, how it goes right from "I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate." Did you notice that? "Born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate." No mention of His teaching, no mention of His miracles, no mention of His calling of the disciples or the sending out of the disciples or the parables that He taught, or the Sermon on the Mount. "Born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate."

You see, it's not because the Creed thinks those things are unimportant. It's that the Creed, on precisely the same logic as the gospels, is concerned to take you to the central deed of Jesus' life. The atoning work accomplished for us on His cross, and anytime you see a Christian teacher downplay that aspect of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, you can be sure that they are up to no good because the gospels themselves want the Christian to make a bee line for the cross. To realize that Jesus' person and all the glory of His incarnation was here and in place in God's plan so that He could die for His people. He was, as so many say, born to die.

Now I want you to see five things that we learn in The Apostles' Creed. Things that are illustrated in the passage which we've just read from Matthew 27: (1) that Jesus suffered; (2) that He suffered under Pontius Pilate; (3) that He was crucified; (4) dead; and (5) buried. Those five things will outline our tasks today.

### **I. He suffered. The redemptive suffering of our Lord.**

The suffering referred to here is specifically the suffering of Jesus' final passion. It is the suffering that occurred in the events immediately leading up to the crucifixion itself. And the Creed is bidding us to contemplate the redemptive suffering of our Lord, the suffering described so painfully and in such detail in Matthew 27 that we've already read. Now it is true, of course, that Jesus lived a life of humiliation. There's a sense in which His very birth was the first step in His condescension and humiliation. And then the fact that He was born in a poor family and wasn't born in a palace amidst riches. He was born in a stable and laid in a manger because there wasn't even room for Him in the inn. And He lived a life of suffering. As an infant, He had to escape with His family into Egypt simply to stay alive because the authorities wanted to kill Him. He would say one day to His disciples, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but

God's own Son, the Son of man, doesn't have a place to lay His head."

Now He lived a life of suffering on our behalf, but the Creed is pointing us to Jesus' cross sufferings--the sufferings surrounding that complex of events in the death of Jesus Christ. Those cross sufferings are the centerpiece of the Creed and that's why the Creed makes a beeline from "born of the Virgin Mary" to "suffered under Pontius Pilate." And my friends, that's why it is so important for us to contemplate the suffering of Jesus Christ. It is important for several reasons.

It is important, first of all, because when we look at the suffering of Jesus Christ on the cross, we see what our sins deserve. Our generation looks at the sufferings of the world and lifts up a questioning eye to the Lord and says, "How could you allow suffering like this?" But the Christian, because he/she has been looking at the cross, knows that that is not the most profound question that we can ask. The more profound question is, "Have I realized that my sins deserve what Jesus received on the cross? Have I realized that I am so bad, so depraved, so godless apart from His grace, that my sin deserved that?" It's a solemn thing that Jesus did not suffer on the cross more than His people deserved. "The Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all" Isaiah says. So making a beeline for the cross and contemplating the sufferings of Jesus Christ is so important because it shows us what our sins deserve.

But it is also important for another reason. It is important because in contemplating the suffering of Christ on the cross, we are forced to ask the question, "Why? What is this happening for? What is the meaning of this?" And the Bible has an answer for that, and it's directly related to the theme that we were just thinking about. The cross, you see, is God's remedy of His people's deservingness of punishment. There is a linkage between our sin and what it deserves, and the death of Jesus Christ. His death is payment for sin. We sang about that just a few moments ago. Flip back to number 247 in your hymnals. "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded," that wonderful text by Bernard of Clairvaux. Some of you will be glad to know that we don't have *all* the verses of that hymn in the hymnal. There's something like 25, and you know I'd sing them, too. In the second stanza of that hymn we say: "What thou, my Lord, hast suffered was all for sinners' gain: mine, mine was the transgression, but Thine the deadly pain." You see, already there Bernard, and Paul Gerhardt who translated him, and then J.W. Alexander of Princeton who translated him, are getting at this; that there is a linkage between Jesus' death and my transgressions. Later in that hymn, in some of those verses that we don't have, Bernard is even clearer as to what the relationship was between Jesus' death and my sin. Listen to what he says: "*My burden is Thy passion, Lord. Thou hast born for me.*" You see, when you look at the cross you see Jesus bearing your burden. That's *your* burden there; that's what *you should have* deserved. He was without sin; you were not. He's bearing your burden. "*My burden in thy passion, Lord, thou hast born for me; for it was my transgression which brought this woe on thee. I cast me down, before me*

*wrath were my rightful lot. Have mercy; I implore thee. Redeemer, spurn me not."*

When you contemplate the sufferings of Christ, you are contemplating the instrument of God's grace to forgive you of your sins. The Father has given His own Son that you might become the righteousness of God in Him. He's born your sins. That's what you're seeing at the cross. But you're even seeing more.

Turn back to Matthew 27 quickly. I want you to see two things that perhaps you missed when we were reading it the first time. First, look at verse 1. What did the chief priests and elders of the people do after they conferred together against Jesus to put Him to death? They bound Him and they led Him away and they did what? They *delivered* Him to Pilate the governor. That word means that they *betrayed* Him into the hands of, or they *handed* Him over to.

Now the next thing that you note happening is this. In verses 22 and following, Pilate hands Him over to them. He hands Him over to the guards to be crucified. And so that theme is a theme you'll find in Matthew of Jesus being delivered over to crucifixion. He's delivered over by Judas, says Matthew in Matthew 10; He's delivered over by the Jews, it says in Matthew 27:1-2; He's delivered over by Pilate in Matthew 27:22 and following; but Paul in Romans 8:32 and Peter in Acts 2:23, say that it was the heavenly Father who delivered Him over. The suffering of Christ was by the free agency of men, but it was in accordance with the Father's eternal plan of redemption. When you see the cross, you're not just seeing a tragedy, you're not just seeing a miscarriage of justice, you're not seeing what one evangelical has recently called, "The murder of Jesus." Yes, a judicial injustice is being done, but this is part of the plan of God. And it's God's plan to forgive unworthy sinners that you're seeing in the sufferings of Jesus Christ. And so, the Creed bids us contemplate the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ who suffered.

## **II. Under Pilate. The concrete historical circumstances of Christ's sufferings.**

Of course, that phrase of the Creed doesn't end with the word suffering, does it? It teaches us a second thing, that He suffered under Pontius Pilate. The Creed is reminding us here of the concrete, historical circumstances of Christ's suffering. The Creed, just like the gospel, goes out of its way to root the sufferings of Christ, the work of Christ, the death of Christ, in history. Even to the point of naming Pilate. Have you ever thought about it? The only two people named in the Creed, apart from God, are Mary and Pilate. What's the Creed doing? The point is that the Creed is saying, "This is history. This really happened." This is not a "once upon a time" story. This happened in our history. It's like saying, "and the execution occurred when Ronnie Musgrove was the governor of Mississippi." It's the same thing. He was crucified when Pilate, Pontius Pilate, was the Procurator of Judea. You know, in that seven or eight-year period when he had

been appointed by Caesar in Rome to control his interests in the land of Palestine, it was then that our Lord and Savior died. The point is, it really happened, this is history, it's not myth, it's not saga, it's not a parable, it's not an illustration, it's history.

### **III. Was crucified. The agonizing and humiliatingly embarrassing means of Christ's death.**

Then, the Creed reminds us that He was crucified: "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified." And in so doing, the Creed is reminding us, it's pointing us to the agonizing and humiliatingly embarrassing means of the death of Christ. You see, the cross was the instrument of punishment for the worst of criminals. It was for outcasts, and it represented the worst punishment that the greatest judicial system in the world could mete out. And to the Jewish people especially, it was a uniquely horrendous thing, the ultimate sign of being cast out and cut off. And that's precisely why God chose it. He chose it, because on the cross, Jesus had to become an outcast so that you could be gathered in. On the cross, Jesus had to bear God's ban, His curse, His anathema, the fullness of His wrath. He had to be treated as a sinner. You remember how Paul puts it: "He who knew no sin, became sin, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Jesus on the cross had to be looked upon by His Father as one who was in rebellion, as one who was deservingly of judgment, because Jesus was there on the cross in our place. And the cross is the instrument of that punishment, and the horror of the cross is not just in the physical pain. You can feel that pain even as you read this passage. All the things that went with it, even when the garments are placed on Him and removed, you can feel the garments tearing His already wounded flesh from Him. You feel it when that crown of thorns is described being pressed down on His head and then you imagine the soldiers taking that reed and beating Him over the head. The physical pain is obvious to you, but deeper than that, is that He is the object of His Father's wrath. He's crucified. And through this means, we are redeemed. The Creed presses you to meditate on that, to realize what the cross was, to realize what the cross cost Him, to realize what the cross accomplished.

### **IV. Dead. The reality of our the death of our Lord.**

And He was dead, the Creed says. The Creed drives home the reality of the death of our Lord. We see Christ's humiliation is His succumbing to the power of death, and the Creed is determined to stress in every way the reality of Jesus' death, over against any tendency to downplay it or deny it. Ever since the proclamation of the gospel began, and ever since people really grasped who Jesus was claiming to be, and who He had demonstrated Himself to be, the very Son of God, there have been some people who have had a hard time swallowing the fact that Jesus died. Some had such a hard time that they denied it, and they

came up with different theories. "Right before they were going to crucify Jesus, His Spirit went to heaven." The Muslims teach that. "He wasn't really human; He only appeared to be a human, and so they couldn't really crucify Him." All sorts of crazy theories have floated around for 19 centuries. And you see what the Creed is doing. The Creed is saying, "No, your Jesus, your Savior, died. He knows what it's like to die." The Creed is determined to stress in every way the reality of Jesus' death. Jesus knows what death is like. He's been there. He's done it.

Have you ever been with a friend standing over a casket, and in a moment of honesty, when all of the superficial things we say to one another, to comfort one another in the hour of death have been stripped away, and in that moment of honesty the friend shares with you the fear that he has because, no matter who it is, they don't know what death is like. They've never been there. And they wonder, "What's this like for my loved one, this friend, this father, this husband, this wife, this child?" And understand, they won't know what death is like until they go there. And isn't it marvelously comforting to know that Jesus does know what real death is like, he's been there, he was there before you, He was there for you, and because He has been through death Himself, He knows how to lead you through the valley of the shadow of it. He knows the portal, friends, He knows how to take you to it, He knows how to take you through it, He knows how to take you somewhere else, because He's been there.

Isaac Watts has us sing, "Alas and did my Savior bleed, and did my Sovereign die." He doesn't explicitly answer his question in the hymn, but the answer is, "Yes, He really died." In everything that it means to die, He died.

Why is that important? Because the Bible says "The wages of sin is death." And so it was absolutely necessary that He taste death in every aspect and ramification of it in order that He pay the wages of sin. And any tendency to deny that he met the fullness of death is actually something that undermines the gospel, because in facing and defeating death, and only through facing and defeating death, was He able to remove the sting of death which is sin.

## **V. And buried. The totality and reality of the Lord's death.**

One last thing. The Creed goes on to say, "He was buried." Just as we've read in the passage before us today. It's the Creed's way of continuing to emphasize and confirm the totality and reality of the Lord's death. He had a real, bodily death. The final episode of His preresurrection, bodily activity in this world was burial. Laid in the tomb. Just like every other person that dies. There's some tender, tender words from Matthew there, aren't there?

It's moving, when you think of this man Joseph, who from a worldly sense had so much to lose. He was a wealthy man, but he had become a follower of Jesus Christ. And he is brave enough to go to Pontius Pilate and say, "Excuse me, Sir,

I'd like Jesus' body." He could have lost everything right there. All he wanted to do was bury his Lord. He could have lost everything because he wanted to bury his Lord. And he does it.

And then there's that beautiful — don't you think of yourself when you read verse 60 — “and he laid Jesus' body in his own tomb.” You see, Jesus was in the grave which was meant for you! And when He rose from that grave, He made it absolutely certain that every one, every last person who is united to Him by faith, will come out of the grave with Him. Hallelujah, what a Savior. Let's pray.

*O Lord God, as we contemplate these simple summary statements from the Apostles' Creed, which just reflect the biblical teaching in Matthew 27 that we see throughout Your Scriptures, we ask that You would enlighten our hearts to see the greatness of Your grace, to believe the facts of Your gospel, and to embrace the only Savior of God's people, even Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray, amen.*

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

*This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.*

*Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.*

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

#### **Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine***

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).