

Foundations 4: I Believe in Jesus Christ, ...He Suffered Under Pontius Pilate; Was Crucified, Died, and Was Buried

February 6, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Luke 23:23-35

²³ But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. ²⁴ So Pilate decided to grant their demand. ²⁵ He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will.

²⁶ As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷ A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. ²⁸ Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' ³⁰ Then

*"they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!"
and to the hills, "Cover us!"*

³¹ For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

³² Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

³⁵ The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."

We are continuing our series on the twelve statements of the Apostles' Creed, which has formed in summary for almost 2000 years the foundation of why we Christians believe what we believe. Each statement is based on Scripture. This week we will focus on the statement, **I believe in Jesus Christ, ...He suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, died, and was buried.**

I have heard some people say that they could not believe in Christianity, because they could not believe that a father would send his son to die such a terrible death as crucifixion. One has to remember though, that God the Father is God and God the Son is God. It is not as if a father sent his son to die. It is God who came himself to die on the cross.

For others the whole concept of Jesus being crucified on a cross like a common criminal is too scandalous for some people to believe. Some people ask, "How could God allow himself to submit to such torture?" For them God would never lower himself to be killed in such a way.

Crucifixion was a terrible way to die. Some of you may remember watching Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* when it was released in 2004. The film took a lot of liberties with the gospel but it did give some sense of the brutality that Jesus endured on the day he was crucified. I watched the movie in the theater with a group from the church, and I remember sitting there in my seat in silence for a good five minutes after the film was over. I was so overwhelmed and saddened by the whole thing, that I knew I could never watch it again.

Crucifixion was the most horrible, the most excruciating (hence, the word crucifixion) form of torture devised by human beings. It was meant to allow the victim to die very slowly of dehydration, of inability to catch one's breath, and of hours upon hours of unbearable pain with no opportunity to catch a break. The question we should be asking is, "Why did God allow himself to die, crucified upon the cross?" The Scriptures provide us with three reasons for this.

1) Jesus died so that he might taste death for everyone. This is how Hebrews 2:9 puts it: "*But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*" What does that mean, that "so that ...he might taste death"?

Jesus' taking our place is one of the most powerful truths of the Christian faith and the cross of Christ. The formal name for it is the *substitutionary atonement*. In a nutshell, Christ died on the cross as a substitute for you and for me. He took our place. We are sinners, and therefore, have willfully joined in Satan's rebellion against God. In God's justice he has declared us guilty and the punishment is death. Romans 6:23 declares that "the wages of sin is death." In other words, we are sentenced to death for our sins. We are brought in cuffs out of the courtroom and are led to the execution chamber. We are strapped in, prepared to die. Suddenly, we get word that the very judge who declared us guilty has allowed his Son to die in our place as a substitute. ...Jesus died so that we do not have to taste spiritual death.¹

2) Jesus died to express solidarity with the human race, making us all one family. This is how Hebrews 2:10-13 puts it: *In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was*

¹ Timothy Tennent, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, pp. 22-23.

fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. ¹¹ Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. ¹² He says, "I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises." ¹³ And again, "I will put my trust in him." And again he says, "Here am I, and the children God has given me."

When we read the gospels we read again and again how Jesus identified with the human race. He was born to a human mother, just as we are born to a human mother. He was baptized, just as we are baptized when we begin our journey of faith. He had times when he was hungry and thirsty. On occasion, he wept. He experienced pain just as we experience pain. He was even tempted as we are tempted. The difference is that Jesus never submitted to the temptation. He resisted temptation and remained sinless.

C. S. Lewis, in his book, *Mere Christianity*, writes about the strength it takes to resist temptation:

Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of [an] army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A [person] who gives in to temptation after five minutes does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it: and Christ, because He was the only [hu]man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only [hu]man who knows to the full what temptation means.²

3) Jesus died to destroy him who holds the power of death, i.e. the devil. Hebrews 2:14 puts it like this: *Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil.*

I once had a religious leader say to me that they did not believe there was such a thing as evil. If we deny there is any such thing as evil, then we need to deny that there is any such thing as goodness.

First Peter 5:8 says, "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." Evil is not some vague mist that blows across our world or some collective influence of societal structures. Evil is embodied, and the rule of evil

² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 124-125.

is extended and advanced through real personalities. Satan oversees a vast network of demonic powers; Satan is the head of the diabolical kingdom. ...Christ personally confronted the powers of this dark world. Satan had tempted Adam and Eve in the garden, unleashing a rebellion in the human race. Satan is the head of the rebellion. Jesus came not just to defeat the idea of evil or subdue our capacity to sin in our own lives, but to defeat and destroy Satan. This battle took place on the stage of human history. This is why the Apostles' Creed says, "He suffered *under Pontius Pilate.*" ...[T]he inclusion of Pilate in the creed reminds us of the awesome consequences when we make decisions opposing God's will.³

When Jesus died on the cross, it was not some kind of metaphor like some people would have us believe today. No, it was a real, historical fact. Jesus came to save us. In order to do so, he knew he had to die for our sake. He died (1) so that he could taste death for everyone, including you; he died (2) to express solidarity with us so that we could also identify with him and with our brothers and sisters in Christ; and he died (3) so that he could destroy the One who holds the power of death, so that we might experience the joy of the resurrection.

³ Timothy Tennent, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, pp. 25-26.