

**“suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
[he descended into hell.]”**

from Mark 15 (NRSV)

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. . . .

. . . ¹⁵So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

¹⁶Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor’s headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. ¹⁷And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. ¹⁸And they began saluting him, “Hail, King of the Jews!” ¹⁹They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. ²⁰After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

. . . ²⁴And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take. . . . ³⁴At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” . . . ³⁷Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. . . .

. . . ⁴³Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. . . .

⁴⁵When he [Pilate] learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph.

⁴⁶Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb.

If you were going to tell someone about Jesus’ life from the day after his birth until the day he died, and you had to do it in nine words, what would they be?

Here’s the thing about Christianity. Ours is not a religion grounded upon ideas or philosophies, nor on traditions or practices. Rather, Christianity is grounded upon the truthfulness of certain historical claims. We don’t begin by developing a workable theology of the Trinity nor even a so-called “proof” of God’s existence. We begin by pointing at history -- actual places, actual times, actual people -- saying, “Look at what God has done!” Look -- this man, Jesus, from Galilee has been resurrected, brought through death to new life. Look -- see, hear, touch, listen, smell.

Here’s an excellent and very early example. When some Christians in Corinth, Greece, question Paul on whether Jesus was actually resurrected, Paul doesn’t engage in an intellectually stimulating conversation about how such a thing could be. Instead, he simply starts listing off witnesses to the truth of the historical event, culminating in a challenge to go and talk to one of the 500 or so witnesses to *what actually happened*. Paul understands quite well that if it didn’t happen, if Jesus wasn’t truly resurrected to new life, then all -- yes, all! -- Christianity is a lie and Christians are to be pitied more than anyone for believing such a lie.

Indeed, Paul puts the claims made quite succinctly: ““For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-5). Bear in mind that Paul wrote this letter only about 25 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, yet already Paul is passing on the basic claims in a creedal form.

You see, Christianity – all that we proclaim in the Good News and more, *all of it* -- stands or falls on the actual historical truthfulness of the claim that God raised Jesus to new life. The claim isn't really all that complicated once you learn what "resurrection" meant in the

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord:
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
the third day he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of God
the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge
the quick 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.

Greco-Roman world. It may or not have happened, but the claim is straightforward. As is this entire section of the creed.

Beginning with the phrase "born to the Virgin Mary" from last week, we learn that this man Jesus, with the mother named Mary, suffered at the hands of Pontius Pilate (who we know was the Roman Prefect of Judea from 26AD to 36AD, during the reign of Tiberius, Emperor of Rome). We also learn that Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified (a particularly shameful and horrible way to execute those seen as opposing Roman rule). Jesus died, of course, for the Roman death squads were efficient if nothing else. And Jesus was then buried, in accordance with the burial practices of first-century Jews. All this we learn from the pages of the Gospel accounts.

Suffered?

All four gospels recount in excruciating detail the suffering that Jesus endured in the hours before his death. But why include it in the creed? It is true, but could there be important theological claims here as well as historical claims?

Certainly, it affirms the price that Jesus paid for our salvation. And, like so much in this section of the creed, it affirms his genuine humanity. We humans know far too much about suffering.

But what about Jesus' divinity? Could we possibly conclude that God suffered that day?

Many Christians over the last two millenia would answer resoundingly "No!" Would not a suffering God be a diminished God, diminished in God's good perfection? Isn't God above our suffering and distress? The Council of Chalcedon in 451AD condemned those who believed that God could suffer. Augustine and John Calvin also denied the possibility of God's suffering. There is a big theological word for this: the *impassibility*¹ of God, i.e., God cannot not suffer.

But this is not the biblical view, instead it is drawn from the Greek philosophers, for whom the "One" was not at all personal. Rather, the "Prime Mover" was perfection. Look at this list of adjectives and you'll have no trouble knowing which is drawn from Scripture and which from Plato.

- Loving
- Faithful
- Compassionate
- Relentless
- Just
- Merciful
- Omniscient
- Omnipotent
- Omnipresent
- Transcendent
- Immutable
- Impassible

Those who defend the impassibility of God will sometimes talk about Jesus' suffering in his human nature, but not his divine nature. However, such a notion diminishes the

¹The term "impassibility" is drawn from the Latin *passio*, which was used for the suffering of Christ in the Vulgate, the Latin version of the Bible translated in about 400AD. The Greek word for suffering is *paschō*.

inseparability of Jesus' two natures – he is not two separate halves joined or commingled in one body. Jesus is one person with two inseparable natures.

If Jesus suffered – as he most assuredly did – Jesus suffered in his human and his divine natures. In addition, what sort of Father doesn't suffer as his only Son is nailed to a cross? Not a Father I wish to know or emulate and certainly not the Father I meet in Scripture.

Dennis Ngien writes:

Our Christian foreparents were right to speak of God as impassible if that means God is not emotionally unstable and cannot be manipulated by humans. But they were wrong to conclude from this that God has no passion. They were wrong to think a suffering God is an imperfect being who necessarily seeks his perfection and tries to overcome his deficiency through actions. C. S. Lewis makes a helpful distinction between "gift love" (agape) and "need love" (eros). God does not act out of need love—a love dominated by self-seeking desires. Rather, God acts out of gift love—a free, self-giving love—sharing his boundless goodness without thought of return. God's goodness means that he loves us with a completely unconditional love, involving himself with us even in our pain.²

Our proclamation to the world of the God-Who-Suffers is unique among the world's religions and seems downright foolish to many. But as Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18).

What an odd, wonderful, strange, compassionate, surprising, loving God it is who loves us!

Crucified?

I've written at length in these studies about crucifixion. The basics are straightforward. Crucifixion was simply the most horrible way the Romans had available to publicly torture those who opposed Rome. The process of dying was painful and often went on for several days. The mounting of the victim on the cross ensured that death came by slow suffocation, for as the dying grew increasingly unable to lift themselves they could no longer expand their lungs and breathe.

The Romans did not invent crucifixion but they did perfect it and used it more widely than any empire before them. Crucifixion was not the death meted out to common criminals; it was generally reserved for those who stood up to the power of Rome. Thus, for example, when Jesus was a boy, several thousand Galilean Jews were crucified along the roadways to put down a rebellion against Roman authority. The sign over Jesus' head that read "King of the Jews" marked him as someone who was crucified as a challenger to the power of Caesar.

But why is it in the creed? Why not simply state that Jesus was executed? Why specify the form of execution? First, it grounds the creed in the actual history, for the specific form of execution *was* crucifixion. Second, it inevitably acknowledges that, by virtue of his claims to lordship, Jesus did oppose Caesar and his empire.

Third, and I think the hardest for us to comprehend, is that this affirmation lifts Jesus up as having suffered the most humiliating and shameful possible death. Crucifixion was so horrible and shameful a death that it couldn't even be mentioned in polite company. For a culture built upon the acquisition of honor and the avoidance of shame, this aspect of crucifixion might well have been the most awful in the eyes of many.

Paul captures this humiliation well when, speaking of Jesus, he wrote, "he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8).

² From Ngien's excellent article, "The God Who Suffers," in *Christianity Today*, February 3, 1997. It is available on line.

Jesus is flogged by Pilate's soldiers, mocked and spat upon. They put a crown of thorns on his head. But the one word affirmation "crucified" tells us all we could stand to know about the price Jesus' paid for his faithfulness to God, to his vocation, to you, and to me.

Dead, and buried?

The process of burying practiced by Jews in Jesus' day was quite different from our own. The dead were not "buried" in graves. Instead they were laid out in tombs until such time that the dried out bones could be collected and put in a box for storage.

But the process isn't really the point here. Why do we bother saying that Jesus was both dead and buried? Isn't that a bit redundant?

Yes, it is redundant and that is exactly the point. We are affirming that Jesus' crucifixion resulted in his death, that Jesus was dead, dead, and dead. No swooning or fainting from which Jesus later recovered. Not merely near death or all-but-dead. Jesus was dead – just as all humans die. No heart beat. No brain waves. Dead. . . . guess I've been clear. The Roman death squad accomplished their task.

Why is this affirmation so important? Because the creed is about to make an astonishing claim, that this dead man, Jesus, was resurrected by God!

There is one more point to be made about Jesus' death that harkens back to last week's study. Jesus died, just as all of us die. He was fully and completely human. The laws of physics and biology applied to him just as to us. But, you may ask, isn't he also fully and completely God? And if so, are you saying that God died?

In a way, yes. It is inescapable that one person of the Trinity, Jesus, dies on that cross. But did the Father die? No. The Spirit? No. So . . . what does all this mean? . . . Beats me. I just know that Jesus died. Not just part of him, but all of him. As we saw last week, in the end, it is a fool's errand to try to figure out all the mysteries of God.

[Descended into hell]?

This final phrase isn't typically said in Methodist churches, though it is footnoted in our hymnal. It has fallen into disuse by other denominations and churches as well. However, many still include the phrase and I'm often asked why we leave it out. I think that some folks wonder if it is because we afraid to mention "hell."

No, that isn't the reason at all. We don't say it because the language is misleading and we don't even agree on how the phrase ought to be understood. These problems have been discussed and debated nearly since the creed's creation. But the problem has gotten worse in recent centuries.

The problem is one I highlighted when we talked about hell in the study from a few weeks ago. As originally created, the Apostles' Creed affirms that "Jesus descended into *Hades*," which is the Greek name for the place of the dead in the ancient cosmology. J. I. Packer, noted conservative Evangelical scholar, writes:

The English is misleading, for "hell" has changed its sense since the English form of the Creed was fixed. Originally, "hell" meant the place of the departed as such, corresponding to the Greek *Hades* and the Hebrew *Sheol*. That is what it means here, where the Creed echoes Peter's statement that Psalm 16:10, "for you do not give me up to Sheol," was a prophecy fulfilled when Jesus rose (see Acts 2:27–31). But since the seventeenth century "hell" has been used to signify only the state of final retribution for the godless, for which the New Testament name is *Gehenna*.³

That's the problem. We hear "hell" and we think of a place of final punishment, but all the creed meant was the place of the dead. And what did Jesus do there? This has been a source of much debate over centuries. Bruce Lockerbie sums it up this way:

To some, the descent into hell represents the physical agony of death upon the Cross. It was hellish in its pain. To others, the word hell means Hades or Sheol, the

³ Packer, J. I. (1996). *Growing in Christ* (56). Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books.

collective abode of the dead, divided into Paradise or Abraham's Bosom—the state of God-fearing souls—and Gehenna, the state of ungodly souls. Thus the descent into hell may suggest that the Son of God carried the sins of the world to hell; or the Son of God carried Good News of deliverance to the godly dead such as Lazarus the beggar and the repentant thief.

Still others believe that the descent into hell accounts for the problem of God's justice by providing an opportunity for all mankind—in eternity as well as in time—to hear the message of redemption from the Word Himself. But whatever interpretation one accepts, the scriptural passages upon which this teaching is based must be studied closely. Some of the standard texts are Job 38:17, Psalm 68:18-22; Matthew 12:38-41; Acts 2:22-32; Romans 10:7; Ephesians 4:7-10, 1 Peter 3:18-20, and 1 Peter 4:6.⁴

In my view, it makes sense to leave this phrase out of the creed. Creeds ought to be succinct, conveying only those affirmations about which nearly Christians can agree.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. How would you summarize Jesus' life? Why do you think the creed says nothing about Jesus' teachings? Why does the creed elevate what we might call the Christ-event?
2. There wasn't much time in the study to expound on the God-Who-Suffers. What difference does such a claim possible make to your life? How might it help those who are suffering? Dennis Ngien tells the following story:

The church of the suffering God must exist in and for this world, accepting suffering itself as it cares for the needy, the sick, and the poor and seeks the liberation of the oppressed. If God is found in the human suffering of Jesus, we should not then preach a triumphalist doctrine of health, wealth, and freedom from affliction for those who believe.

Once a Christian couple came to me in Russia, requesting that I pray for divine healing for their sick baby. After prayer, the baby died in my arms. One could have asked, "Where is God?" Triumphalism has nothing to say at such moments, except lashing the wounded into deeper guilt and pain for their supposed lack of faith. But these bereaved parents said: "It is better to be in the storm with Jesus than to be in it without Jesus."

What is your reaction to this story? Speculation as to the "why" of suffering will always be fruitless. Have you experienced the presence of Jesus in a time of your own suffering?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Hosea 11:8-9 Could this be the word of a God who is not compassionate, who does not suffer?	Tuesday, Isaiah 53:3-9 The suffering servant of God
Wednesday, Acts 2:14-36 Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost	Thursday, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 The contrast of Christ crucified with wisdom
Friday, Matthew 12:38-42 Jesus will be Three days in the heart of the earth.	Weekly Prayer Concerns

⁴ From D. Bruce Lockerbie's *The Apostle's Creed: Do You Really Believe It*, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL 1977, page 53-54.

