

The Need for Creed, Pt. 4:
Suffered Under Pontius Pilate

I Corinthians 15: 1-4; I Timothy 6: 10-16

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We've been studying the ancient statement of faith known as the Apostles' Creed. I've been hammering on the idea that the Creed is not just a list of dead, dry beliefs affirmed by people who don't want to think, doubt or be nice to other people. Rather, the Creed is a living map for a robust spiritual quest to truly know God. Two weeks ago, I mentioned that my whole view of the Creed changed when I realized that it's actually a story more than a list of ideas. The story has three parts. In part one, we discover what God the Father is up to, creating and sustaining all things. Last week, Barry got us considering chapter 2. What's the story of God the Father's only Son, Jesus? We heard about his entrance into the world. Pretty special. Jesus came into the world when God's Spirit joined himself to the ovum of a human woman, and Jesus was born from the Virgin Mary. That's mystic! Jesus was, and is, Son of God and Son of Man. He is the eternal Son of God come to us as a man.

So what's next in the story? Well, we've got four parts in the next episode: "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried." He suffered under Pontius Pilate. What does that mean? I remember as a kid literally suffering under Danny Stewart. The big guy would sit on me and pound me. I especially remember the day he had me pinned over a red ant pile. 32 bites. Yes, I counted 'em. Now Pontius Pilate may sound like a good name for a professional wrestler—or maybe it would need to be tweaked just a bit for marketing purposes: "And in this corner, Pontius the Pilot. Beware! The Pilot is flying the Pain Plane!" But obviously we're talking about something very different than a backyard brawl.

From AD 26 to 36, Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of the region of Judea, what we know as southern Israel, including Jerusalem. In those days, the Roman Empire ruled all the known world. Israel was an occupied state. The government did not share our faith. Pilate represented the rule of Caesar, the Roman Emperor. Pilate represented the Powers-That-Be. We have historical records that prove Pilate was a real person. But don't miss this: Pilate is also a *symbol* of the all rulers in every place who insist that they make the rules. Pilate is a symbol for all the powers and people that tell us, "Reality is what I make it to be.

It's my world, and you're just living in it." Pilate is a symbol for the way the world is. Jesus suffered under Pilate. That means Jesus came under the control of the powers that claimed to rule the world.

Now before we go any further, I want to address a question that frequently comes up about the Creed. If the Creed is a story, and this part of the Creed is the story of Jesus, how come we skip right from his birth to his death? What about all the stuff that happened in between? Is the only thing that matters about Jesus that he died? I used to wonder about that too. Wouldn't you think we'd say something about teaching the truth, healing the sick, and welcoming the sinners? Why is all that missing? Then I came across a book called *Early Christian Doctrines* by an Oxford scholar named J.N.D. Kelly.¹ You know the dude is a serious scholar when he goes by three initials and no first name. Professor Kelly explained that a Creed is not meant to say everything there is to say about Jesus. A Creed is meant to define the boundaries of the story. Its purpose is to define the truth especially in the areas that are being challenged by heretics and nonbelievers. The life of Jesus was never in question in the early centuries. No one disputed the record of what Jesus taught and did. Even his enemies agreed about his life. In other words, all we read in the gospels about Jesus is affirmed in the Creed even though it's not said. Jesus' life falls within the green pastures that are bordered by his wondrous incarnation and his death under Pontius Pilate.

So, what do we make of the fact that the Creed is actually quite repetitious here? We basically have four words meaning the same thing: he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. Isn't that a bit of overkill? From the beginning people just couldn't get their heads around the staggering truth: the man who died was God. Say it another way, the God who became man died. *God died!* That's wild and seems impossible. *The man who died was God.* That's wild and demands that I serve this man, not myself. People just have to push against this reality. Some were shocked and offended with the idea that the infinite, Almighty God should undergo something so shameful as a horrifying death on a cross. Some are offended that the man on the wood beams is the Lord of the Universe who bids us join him in a life of denying self and following him. It overloads our hard-wiring.

Crucifixion was a disgusting death. To hang naked and bloody on a splintery rack of wood until you suffocate hours later is one of the worst tortures we have devised. We wear silver crosses and see a lovely symbol of redemption, but all too often we forget the pain in the reality. People have suggested Christians might do better to wear little electric chairs, or lethal injection syringes, or little nooses if we

want to get closer to the reality that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried.” Try that next time you’re dressing for a glittering Christmas party and see what reaction you get!

The eternal Son of God, who flung the stars into the sky and sustains them in their courses, this God took flesh and entered our world. But he did not come using his power to overthrow all other powers. He did not smash and dominate. He gave himself away. He gave up control. He who hung the stars let himself be hung on the deadly tree. He died a humiliating, shameful death at the hands of the power that ruled the visible world. And somehow, that emptying, that humbling, defeated Evil far more thoroughly than swords and spears ever could.

This is the story we can never quite grasp. But neither can we get away from it. In fact, we keep telling this story in our best movies and novels. Consider what’s at the heart of the *Harry Potter* novels. Have you ever wondered why they’re so popular? I know some Christians have a lot of anxiety about Harry Potter because of its milieu of magic. Whatever your opinion on that, it’s important to realize the theme at the core of an epic saga that has captured the imagination of our culture. Harry Potter is all about how love defeats evil power by the offering of life in sacrifice. It’s a constant reflection on what hope we can have in the face of so much loss and death—all our hope rests on the seeming weakness of love overcoming the loud fierceness of death. We have a very sturdy bridge between the fiction of Harry Potter and the truth in the story of Jesus. As the final movies come out, Christians need to cross that bridge to our culture, and then winsomely invite the world over to our side. What common ground we have to say, “You know, it makes no sense, this great Story—how do you defeat death by dying? Yet, it gets in our bones and will not let us go. What’s at the heart of this idea—that love in dying brings life? Even in our secular age, this Story has great power.

So let’s take it a bit deeper. In Paul’s letter to Timothy, he gives his son in the faith a final encouragement:

As for you, O man of God....Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfast, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment... (I Timothy 6: 10-14).

Let me paraphrase what I hear Paul saying: “Timothy, you made a good confession. At your baptism, you declared your faith in Christ Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Now you have to fight out living for him in a dark, broken, hostile world. It’s a struggle. So grab hold of the eternal life in you by the Spirit of God. Remember Jesus who also made the good confession. He held true before Pontius Pilate. Now you do the same.”

Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate. He suffered because Pilate ruled the world where Jesus lived, and Jesus saw and lived reality quite differently. Amidst the Roman swords and shields, Jesus saw that his Father is the true ruler. Amidst the power of the Empire, Jesus saw that love is the true force at the center of the universe. Amidst a world where the elite were rewarded, Jesus elevated the outcasts. Amidst a world where the Emperor’s Word was law, Jesus learned, lived and taught his Father’s Word as the last Word about life, purpose, reality and truth.

Jesus made the good confession. Let’s eavesdrop for a moment on the encounter between Pilate and Jesus on Good Friday. Pilate reminded Jesus how life in the real world works: “Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” Jesus answered him from the point of view of a quite different reality: “You would have no authority at all unless it had been given to you from above” (John 19: 10-11). Pilate, your power is derived from God above. Your game is not the real game. You don’t take my life. I lay it down of my own accord.

We live in a world that insists, “This is the way it is. Don’t fight it. Just accept the real world.” What strength it takes to live from a higher vision! When all evidence appeared to be to the contrary, Jesus made the good confession. He knew God is true. He knew the way of life and love. And then he submitted to die a horrifying death. He knew and proclaimed that his Father rules, not Pilate, and then he let Pilate have his way with him. He went under the power of death. He died and was put away, buried, sealed up, written off, finished. The eternal God tasted the defeat that’s all over a world ruled by Pontius Pilate.

Tears filled my eyes this past week as I heard a friend share the sufferings of his daughter. “It’s like we’re riding the crazy train in our house. We’re trapped in an Ozzie Osbourne song and going off the rails.” My own father’s heart broke to hear him. And the words ran through my head, “Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate. He was crucified, dead and buried.” How do these things fit together? So the week went on: another shattered marriage; another hopeless financial situation;

yet another wretched, damnable cancer; another journey into grief; more pain, and still more pain.

The voice of doubt speaks, “Boy, what does your religion have to say about all this? It doesn’t look to me like God reigns. It looks to me like Death has the last word. It doesn’t look to me like a Lord of love is running the show. You all manage to hurt each other pretty good. It doesn’t look like there’s a king on the throne; if your God rules, has he nodded off for a few centuries? It doesn’t look like anyone is in control except the people who have a little strength and a little power for a few years—but they die too. Everyone dies. What you got to say about that, preacher boy?”

I put my hand on the little bronze cross that hangs against my chest. Jesus made the good confession. Then he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified dead and buried. My God has accounted for all this. He is not a stranger to our suffering. He is not aloof from our tears. He rode the crazy train. He rode the crazy train of the world of Pontius Pilate until it ran right off the rails into a cross.

He is here. I visualize each horrible situation. He is here. He is here. I feel the cross under my shirt again. It is very old, centuries old. Others, many others perhaps, have worn this. I have not seen them. I do not know who they were in this world, but I know who they are in Christ. Others dead and gone, from times even worse than this one, touched this cross and said our Creed. They made the good confession right into the teeth of Pontius Pilate.

And we’ve all heard Pilate’s condemnation. We have each and all been overwhelmed by the world. We’ve all succumbed to time. We’ve all seen loved ones slip through our fingers. We’ve seen treasures evaporate, and wickedness triumph, and little ones get crushed. We’ve heard him in dozens of languages, every generation. Pilate is ever asking, “Do you not know that I have the authority? I rule.”

I touch the cross one more time. “No,” I whisper, “You do not.” I am not alone in making this answer. Neither are you. There are witnesses who have gone before us. We are only here because they made the good confession and fought the good fight. I draw on the thousands upon thousands who have dared to meet Pilate’s gaze as they recited this creed. “No, you do not rule. You would have no authority over Christ at all unless it had been given from above. Caesar is not lord. Jesus is Lord. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. A sinless man went to a sinner’s death at the hands of sinful, prideful human power.

And somehow, in the mystery at the core of the universe, he died and beat death. Sinless, he took the sin of the world on himself and broke the grip of evil on the human heart. “

Let’s bring this all together. God entered our world in Jesus. It was God who went to the cross. He “refused to be alone or without us, but insisted on penetrating into the heart of our sin and violence and unappeasable agony in order to take it all upon himself and to save us.”ⁱⁱ He made our death his own.

Think what comfort you have to offer those around you. He suffered under Pontius Pilate. He suffered under a world full of arbitrary rules and high taxes. He made his way in a world where stuff breaks all the time and the best laid plans fall apart. He held the truth in a world insisting on the reality of its vanity, its cliques, its glamour, its momentary heroes. He got crushed by the bandits who think they rule the world. And before Pilate he made the good confession. He knew the eternal life that no death in this world can remove.

Those who suffer can know they are not alone. God is not aloof. He has been there. But more. Passing through this way of suffering and the valley of death, Jesus has transformed it all. In Jesus love has triumphed over evil. Slaves to sin and futility have been redeemed into freedom. The death which swallowed Jesus has itself been swallowed by Life. But how that works—well, that’s a story for next week when we consider the good news that He descended into Hell.

Study Questions

- Pilate is a symbol of the powers-that-be, wherever they may be, at whatever level. What are the chief interests of the powers-that-be?
- What are some of the most prevalent powers the people in your church face each week? What parts of Christian joy and faith does the “real world” want to suppress?
- What reaction would you get if you wore a little electric chair on a chain, or a syringe on a string? How would you explain?
- What *crazy trains* have been running through the lives of your people and family?
- How do the words “He is here” address the crazy trains and Pilates of life?
- How does this portion of the creed assure us that Jesus has penetrated to the depths of our humanity in order to save us?

¹ J N D Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1960), pp. 29-51.

² Thomas Torrance, "Preaching Christ Today" in *A Passion for Christ*, Gerrit Dawson and Jock Stein, eds., (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1999), p. 13.