

Redeemer OPC, Hawaii

Adult Sunday School

The Apostles' Creed (5)

“Fourth Article - The Son's Death”

I. Introduction.

A. Review. Last time, we studied the advent of the Son of God in His Incarnation. We saw that, since He was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary, and it was then that He took to Himself a fully human nature, His advent was not really at His birth, but at His conception. We noted the hypostatic union of the divine nature and the human nature in the one Person of Christ. We found out how He remained sinless even though born of the substance of Mary, a sinner, by the Spirit's holding Him apart from it. We found out the covenantal significance of His virgin birth, that it was necessary for Him to be Head of the covenant of grace. We looked at what it means to be fully divine and fully human, and how Jesus Christ can have two natures in one Person without that being a contradiction, and how we understand that He is not half God, half man, but fully God and fully man. We also found that the Apostles' Creed carefully, even though simply, set forth the Incarnation of Christ to defend against heresies attacking the church then, and laid the foundation for the church's later defense against other heresies that attacked the church. Now, we move on to that which was understood to be at the heart of the gospel, and still is, of course: the atoning death of Jesus Christ. “He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; He descended into hell.” In this lesson, we will only

get to the first part of the article, “He suffered under Pontius Pilate.

II. The Significance of Suffering’s Occurrence under Pontius Pilate.

- A. The historical and cultural references. Secular historians recorded a great deal about the rulers throughout the Roman Empire accurately enough that their administrations can be dated with fair accuracy. That the Bible records that Jesus’ suffering happened under the administration of Pontius Pilate provides an important historical reference. It shows when it took place and in the midst of what other historical events and cultural phenomenon, so it shows us the “fullness of the times” in which Jesus carried out His work, and helps us to more fully and accurately interpret the Bible. One thing we have found out is that Pontius Pilate is generally looked upon by history as a weak ruler, particularly prone to man-pleasing when it came to the subjects he was to rule in Caesar’s name. We certainly can conclude that from the way he gave in to the Jewish leaders, and then the people they stirred up to call for Christ’s crucifixion. But it gives us a better sense of the man, and the reason he gave in so easily. However, more importantly, it shows us...
- B. The civil rule. Jesus was officially condemned to die as a criminal by the civil ruler. If His case had originated in the church among its leaders (apostate though they were), and had gone as far as being turned over to the civil ruler, then He had already been condemned by the OT church authorities; before the kingdom of Israel had fallen, He would have been stoned. But under Rome’s rule, they were not allowed the authority to put anyone to death. So, they took Him to Pilate for him to condemn Jesus and subject Him to the death penalty. Pilate did that, but not before finding Jesus innocent and declaring Him officially to be innocent. That meant that any

charge with which the Jews had charged Him was also declared to be invalid. Jesus was found innocent on charges that had been brought before Pilate; he found Jesus innocent of *all* and declared it officially. He was an innocent man being sent to the death penalty. All we need to ask, and what we need to understand is, what do we, whom He came to save, deserve? “In the day that you eat thereof, you shall surely.....die.” All of us have deserved the death penalty from the moment Adam sinned, and not just physical death as you know. By our fall we lost communion with God (spiritually dead) and were made liable to His wrath and curse (judicial death), too. And all of these we deserved eternally. So, the official declaration of His innocence stands to show all of history that Jesus Christ was the sinless One going in the place of sinners to suffer their penalty in their place. God, by His providence, even set up the Jews’ custom of asking, and being granted, the release of a criminal/prisoner by the Roman proconsul at the time of the Passover/Feast of Unleavened Bread; and then God used that custom to illustrate by a historical event what He was doing by the release of Barrabas, the murderer. The worst kind of criminal who had sinned the humanly worst sin was released from the penalty of death, and in effect counted innocent, while Jesus Christ suffered the penalty Barrabas deserved in Barrabas’s place. That is exactly what He did for you and me, the worst kind of sinners who deserve the infinite and eternal death penalty that Christ satisfied on the cross.

III. “He Suffered Under Pontius Pilate.” The Significance of the Suffering.

- A. The Extent of Christ’s Suffering. Scripture importantly records more than just Christ on the cross, suffering and dying there. The suffering and bloodshed began before

that. Jesus suffered beatings, pain, and mockery in a process of humiliation that was leading up to the depth of His estate of humiliation in death and it signaled that it was on the way. Even the mockery caused suffering for Jesus because He was the Lord of glory, even if His glory was veiled behind frail human flesh. He deserved the height of worship, reverence, respect, and exaltation; but He received mockery and disdain instead, from people He had created, all happening while He was the sinless Creator in the midst of a sin-cursed creation. It was spiritual torment for Him, as well as the beginning of bloodshed with the scourging and the crown of thorns. This leads us to consider what Christ suffered even before His trial and crucifixion. We all need to realize that Jesus' suffering began at birth. He was born in a low, humble condition, poor, deprived. He was born in a post-fall body, though without sin, a body that could suffer hunger, thirst, pain, sickness. He was subject to all the miseries of life, which are part of the penalty for man's fall into sin. As the WSC asks and teaches, "What is the misery of that estate whereinto man fell? All mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all the miseries of this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever." Jesus Christ had to suffer all of that in order to satisfy the *full* penalty for our sins; it was man's sin that brought all miseries and suffering into the world as part of the penalty. Our Savior had to suffer had to suffer it all. He didn't suffer it on His own account. He suffered it as our Substitute, part of the whole penalty, and leading up to the epitome of His suffering on the cross. What we need to infer from this is that the righteousness that Jesus fulfilled in keeping God's law on behalf of and in place of those He came to save did not just take place during His life, but also while He

was on the cross. He was perfectly obedient to God's law while He was suffering on the cross, right up to His death. But what relates most closely to this article of the creed is the suffering that Jesus accomplished in His life and up to and including His death. Now, let's consider...

- B. The Nature of His Suffering. There are those among the ranks of Christianity who mean well, but because they are reacting too rashly to another error, they say that the physical death of Jesus was enough to pay for our sins. Having said that, some of them go on to qualify their explanation and come closer to the truth. Those who are at the other end of the spectrum, against whom the first react, teach that Jesus died a spiritual death that included His human spirit's journey into hell, His human spirit's actual death at the hands of the devil, and the need for Him to be regenerated; that is, to experience the same new birth that the sinner must have in order to be saved. It is no wonder that there is a reaction to it. It not only flies in the face of what the Bible plainly teaches, it is also among the most horrid of the teachings of the word-faith movement. It disparages the Person and work of Jesus Christ and turns Him into a literal sinner. It makes Him subject to the devil and in need of salvation from him, rather than the sovereign God to whom all things are subject. But if both of those positions are wrong, what is the truth? What did Christ suffer, and who punished Him? He did suffer the physical torments of crucifixion. Because He is the Son of God, even His physical torments were substitutionary and had meritorious value; what the unsaved sinner will suffer in hell, he will suffer in body as well as in spirit, just as both sin and the curse laid upon us for it affect both body and soul while we are on this earth. Rev. 20:11-15 is clear that the wicked will be cast into the lake

of fire in what it calls “the second death” after their bodies are raised in a resurrection unto judgment (John 5:28-29). But the physical suffering that Jesus bore in place of His people to satisfy divine justice on their account, He bore on the cross. It was not limited to physical suffering. He was tormented in His human soul as well because the penalty for sin must be carried out on the fullness of man’s being. And the penalty of death in its fullness, as it was carried out on man for his sin, had to be suffered by Jesus to satisfy it all. That indicates what He suffered as well. Since He had to suffer the judicial penalty that man incurred, He suffered the wrath and curse of God in His soul as well as in His body. But here is the part that answers that earlier question: He had to suffer the “spiritual death” that plagues man as a result of his sin against God. Man estranged himself from God and lost communion with God. Jesus, on the cross, had to experience that loss of communion with God in His human nature, and have all blessing removed from Him. He was cut off for that time, as the three hours of darkness on the cross indicates. It was an event that God used to symbolize that He turned the light of His blessed countenance away from His Son. And Jesus suffered physical death, in which His soul was torn apart from His body, and His body had to remain under the power of death for a time. Jesus’ spirit did NOT go into hell during that time. In Heb. 9, Scripture plainly teaches that He presented Himself to God to offer the merits of His sacrifice to the Father. Jesus Himself told the repentant thief on the cross next to Him, “Today, you shall be with Me in paradise,” and paradise was merely another term for heaven. One more thing we must note in this connection is that Jesus suffered at the hands of God. It was God against whom man sinned, man who violated God’s law and justice. It was God

who assessed the penalty of death against man, and who executes that penalty. It must, therefore, have been God who punished Jesus as the Substitute for those He came to save. Many passages of Scripture bring all these truths to us in concise form (Rom. 1:18; Gal. 3:13; Heb. 9:11-14, 24-28; Isa. 53; etc.).

C. The Theological Significance. There are a few more things we need to add to understand this well. One, as we have alluded, Jesus suffered only in His human nature. His divine nature did not suffer, even though the divine nature was never absent from the Person of the Mediator. This is due to an quality of God that the Bible teaches us that theologians call the impassability of God. You'll note that the word has the root "pass—" in it again, like the passive obedience of Christ and the passion of Christ. As we have explained before, this older use of the word "passion" refers to suffering, not emotions. Jesus' passion was His suffering; and His passive obedience was His obedience to the demand of God's justice that a penalty be suffered over the breaking of God's law (His people broke it; He suffered for it); therefore, the impassability of God is the inability of God to suffer—anything. Suffering involves change of condition, and God can't change. "For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob are not consumed" (Mal. 3:6). Certainly, the Second Person of the Trinity could not suffer death, the consummation of the penalty, for that would be the death of God. So Jesus Christ, the Mediator, suffered only in His human nature. The second thing for us to point out here is something that Jesus Christ accomplished in His suffering for us. He sanctified suffering to us by removing from it the penal nature it holds for the unbeliever. He took away our sins and guilt upon the cross, true, but He also took away the sting of suffering in the

sense that it is no longer a temporal punishment to His people for sin. It holds value to us as both a chastisement and a sanctifying influence as the Holy Spirit uses it in our lives in those ways. But there is nothing left of any punishment to us in our sufferings, whether they are afflictions, or persecutions, or whatever their source. Now we move on to...

IV. “[He] Was Crucified, Died, and Was Buried.”

A. The Significance of the Crucifixion. Why the death of the cross? We could take the easy way out and say that it fulfilled the prophecies about it. It certainly does fulfill prophecies such as Ps. 22 and others. But it also fulfills types such as the brass serpent lifted up on a standard. It foreshadowed Christ’s death on the cross in that the likeness of the very thing that brought death to the Israelites, symbolic of their sin, was put up on a pole. When any of them were bitten by the serpent of death, he was to look up to the brass serpent, trusting that he would be healed and have life by the promise of God. It foreshadowed that Christ would be hung up on the cross and bear the sins, and the resulting sting of death, of His people. By looking to Him in faith, they would be healed and have life. When Paul quoted the OT prophet and said, “the sting of death is sin,” it was to the episode that resulted in the brass serpent that they alluded. But there are other reasons why Christ had to die by crucifixion. One, anyone who was hung on a “tree” was recognized as a cursed man. Jesus Christ had to be cursed by God in our place in order for us to be blessed with salvation. Two, Jesus Christ had to be lifted up between earth and heaven to show that He was the bridge between God and man, the only Mediator who could reconcile God to man, and make man to be reconciled to God. Three, since Jesus Christ was to be put

to death by the hands of godless Gentiles, the Romans, it would be done in a Roman manner, but with theological significance. Crucifixion was the death penalty the Romans used for the lowest form of criminal in their eyes, murderers and rebels. Anyone who was crucified was a reproach, being considered the worst kind of sinner. But to God, that's what all of us are: we're sinners, rebels against God and those who would have murdered Him if we could, and therefore the worst kind of "criminal" in God's eyes, those who deserve the eternal death penalty. Jesus had to die the most ignominious death, as a reproach, in our place. He had to be considered as the worst sinner and die the death of the worst sinner to pay our penalty in our place. He was, as we saw earlier, completely innocent. The guilt for which He was crucified was ours, imputed to Him. Next,...

B. "[He] Died." It might seem redundant to say this in the creed, but it isn't. Scripture itself records many details of Jesus' death while He was on the cross. The act of crucifying Him and His death are given as two closely related but different events. So the creed does too. The creed said He was crucified to specify by what means He would die. It summarizes the details and fact of His dying and death by saying He died. The fact of His death is necessary for any Christian to believe and confess as an element of the gospel for our salvation. If He did not die, we are not saved, because it would mean that He did not pay the full penalty for our sins. It's plain and simple. Next,...

C. "[He] Was Buried." Notice how the three terms in this section of the article are closely connected together. Each has a purpose to add the next step to the last, but also to confirm the previous. To be buried according to the Jewish custom ensured

that the dead were dead. Jesus was placed in a tomb carved in the rock, not underground, yes. But according to the custom, His body was wrapped in cloths and covered with about 100 pounds of ointments, including on His face. That Jesus was buried ensured that He was dead. But there is more to it. That He was buried the same day that He was hung on the cross, and was not allowed to remain on the cross (aka “the tree”) overnight, meant that even in death, obedience to God’s law was maintained where He was concerned. (READ Deut. 21:22-23.) Note, too, that the burial of the body by God’s people, instead of burning the body like the pagan practice, showed the respect for the body God created and the hope of the resurrection of the body from the dead. In Jesus’ case, His people made certain that His body was not thrown into Gehenna like the bodies of others who were crucified, there to rot and slowly burn in the fires of the trash dump. They buried Him, and in God’s providence, it was preparation for His resurrection from the dead.

- V. “He Descended into Hell.” The word-faith movement with their twisted “spiritual death of Jesus” doctrine love this part of the creed. They want to claim that it confirms their twisted falsehood because it appears to them as though the early church believed the same nonsense about Jesus going down into hell to be punished and put to death spiritually by the devil and in need of regeneration. As we said earlier, nothing could be further from the truth, and that is NOT what the creed is saying by this statement. It becomes very much easier to understand when we remember that the Apostles’ Creed was written in the same koine Greek as the NT. It doesn’t use a literal term for hell; it uses the term “hades.” Hades, like the Hebrew word Sheol, was the word for the grave, literally, and by metonymy in the NT, for the estate of death. What confuses the issue for some is that the grave and the estate of death

were sometimes used in Scripture figuratively to refer to hell itself, where the suffering of the unsaved under the wrath of God takes place, and where all of us except Christ deserve to be and suffer eternally for our sins. Knowing it is that same penalty that our Substitute and Surety Jesus Christ had to suffer to pay for our sins in our place, it is likely that this is the reason that some have taken “He descended into hell” as a reference to the suffering that Christ underwent while on the cross. It is true that Christ underwent what His people would have had to suffer in hell were it not for His suffering it in our place. Thomas Vincent, one of the Puritans, insightfully, plainly, and rightly pointed this out when he wrote, “The sufferings of Christ were equivalent to the eternal torments of the damned in Hell.” They had to be, you see, because we for whom He bore divine wrath and torments in His suffering would have been the damned in hell if He had not. But is that what the clause, “He descended into Hades” refers to? Or does it refer to His time in the grave and the estate and condition of death? You’ll find both interpretations of that clause of the creed among solidly Reformed men of both past and present. It is interesting that the Westminster Standards allow for either one. In the Westminster Confession of Faith, in 8.4, with language that is reminiscent of both Scripture and the Apostles’ Creed, says that Jesus “endured most grievous torments immediately in his soul, and most painful sufferings in his body; was crucified, and died; was buried, and *remained under the power of death*” (emphasis mine). In following up what seems to be a clear reference to the Apostles’ Creed with this language, it seems nearly certain that the framers of our confession intended this to be an interpretation of the clause “He descended into hell.” The Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 50 backs this interpretation even more explicitly when it asks, “Wherein consisted Christ’s humiliation after his death?” and answers, “Christ’s humiliation after his death consisted in his being

buried, and continuing in the state of the dead, and under the power of death till the third day, which hath been otherwise expressed in these words, He descended into hell.” On the other hand, Q. 49 seems to allow for the other interpretation, though it does not make specific reference to the Apostles’ Creed, when it says that Jesus, “having also conflicted with the terrors of death and the powers of darkness, felt and borne the weight of God’s wrath, he laid down his life an offering for sin, enduring the painful, shameful, and cursed death of the cross”—this being given as part of the description of how He humbled Himself in His death. I’m completely in agreement with the statements that both interpretations make because they are 100% scripturally true. However, when it comes to understanding which of the two statements the clause of the Apostles’ Creed is making, and what the writers of that creed meant by what they wrote, I stick with what WLC Q. 50 says, that it refers to the grave, the estate of death, and Jesus’ remaining under death’s power for a time at the lowest point of His estate of humiliation. I think that is why the writers of the creed placed the statement *after* “He was crucified, died, and was buried.” That interpretation matches the logical flow of each term in the whole fourth article of the creed.