

Today I want us to begin by focusing in on one particular part of the Apostle's Creed, that is Jesus Christ "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried"

Often times, we tend to skip right over the part of "suffered under Pontius Pilate and jump right to the crucifixion. I guess I can understand why, the gospels spend very little time on how Jesus suffered under Pilate before he was led out to be crucified.

In fact, Matthew and Mark each devote only 5 verses to it. (Matthew 27:27-31; Mark 15:16-20) Luke doesn't mention it at all. And John only includes 3 verses to the torture Jesus endured before his crucifixion. (John 19:1-3) However, since torture and scourging were such common occurrences under Roman rule, the early readers of the gospels didn't need any more details in order to imagine what took place. We don't have that same firsthand knowledge, so let me briefly describe to you what took place.

The victim was stripped naked and he was either tied to a post with his hands above his head and his feet spread out or else he could be bent double over a post so that his back was arched. The whip itself had a wooden handle about 2 feet long onto which were attached several leather thongs studded at intervals with sharpened pieces of bone and lead pellets. Jewish law forbid that anyone be lashed more than 40 times, so they stopped at 39 just to make sure they didn't violate that rule. The Romans had no such law. There were usually two Roman soldiers who were particularly brutal and trained to inflict the maximum amount of agony. Few prisoners endured a scourging without passing out. When they did, salt water was dumped over them to revive them before the beating continued. Such a scourging always proceeded crucifixion and it reduced the naked body to strips of raw flesh.

In Jesus' case the soldiers didn't stop there. They wove a crown of thorns which they beat down onto his head, spit on him, punched him, and mocked him as king. A robe was tied around his neck as they scoffed at him. When they tired of entertaining themselves, the soldiers tore the robe from Jesus' back. The fabric had probably stuck to the clots of blood from the wounds. Thus, when it was callously ripped off him, it caused excruciating pain, like a bandage being roughly pulled from an unhealed cut, though this would have been across his entire back.

Jesus was then led back to Pontius Pilate, who condemned him to death. Mark simply puts it this way, "Then they led him out to crucify him." (Mark 15:20b)

Scholars differ on how crucifixion was carried out. Some say the cross was the shape of the small "t" that we are used to seeing in the church. Other scholars believe that the cross was in the shape of a capital "T" with the crossbar attached on the top. Most scholars do agree that Jesus would have

only carried the crossbar. Whatever the shape, crucifixion remains one of the most horrible kinds of death.

The victim would be roughly thrown down, his arms stretched out across the beam, and he would be nailed through the wrist. It was necessary to nail a victim through the wrist in order for him to support the weight of his body as he hung on the cross. In addition, this would mean that the nail was driven through nerve. If you've ever hit your elbow and felt a shooting pain down your arm, you've experienced what it is like to hit the same nerve as the nail would have.

The victim was then hoisted up, and the crossbeam was set in a notch and fastened there. Since crucifixions were so common under the Romans, most often the upright beam stayed in place and only the crossbeam was taken down.

Next the victim's feet were nailed to the cross with the knees slightly bent. This resulted in the victim's body sagging causing excruciating pain. In order to breathe, the victim had to push himself up by his feet, every time scraping his wounded back.

Back and forth the searing pain continued. Before long arm fatigue set in and the victim's arms would begin to cramp up. This resulted in the inability to raise himself, meaning he could inhale but couldn't exhale. Because he couldn't exhale, carbon dioxide began building up in his lungs.

This continued for hours of endless pain, joint rending cramps, and partial suffocation.

Then another agony began, a deep crushing pain in the chest as the area around the heart slowly filled with fluid which began to compress the heart.

It's close to over now. What little blood is left has become thick and sluggish, as the heart works harder and harder to pump it through the body. The tortured lungs gasp for every breath.

Then comes death.

In Jesus' case, the soldiers went a step further and pierced his side with a spear causing the fluid that had been gathering around his heart to suddenly flow out. (John 19:34)

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two secret disciples of Jesus came to claim Jesus' body. They wrapped it in strips of linen and placed Jesus' body in the grave.

All of this leads to the all-important question, "Why did Jesus have to suffer and die?" Throughout the history of the church, many great minds have tried to answer

that question and they have come up with several different theories. These are called the theories of atonement. I want to look at five of them briefly today.

The first theory I want to look at is the Moral Influence Theory.

What I like about this theory is that it focuses on not just the death of Jesus Christ, but on his entire life. Those who hold this view believe that humanity is spiritually sick and in need of help and that individuals are moved to accept God's forgiveness by seeing God's love in all that Jesus did. According to this theory, the saving work of Jesus is not limited to the crucifixion, but also in his teachings and the example of a sinless life. In this theory Jesus is crucified as a martyr due to the radical nature of his moral example. In this way the Moral Influence Theory emphasizes Jesus Christ as our teacher, our example, our founder and leader, and ultimately, as a result, our first martyr. Those who hold to Moral Influence theory believe that the purpose and meaning of Christ's death was to demonstrate God's love toward all humankind.

The second is The Ransom Theory.

This theory teaches that Jesus Christ died as a ransom sacrifice, paid to Satan. Jesus' death acts as a payment to satisfy the debt on the souls of the human race, the same debt we inherited from Adam's original sin.

This theory claims that Adam and Eve sold humanity over to the Devil at the time of the Fall. Therefore, God had to pay the Devil a ransom. Once the Devil accepted Christ's death as a ransom, this theory concluded, justice was satisfied, and God was able to free us from Satan's grip.

This theory, though widely held throughout the Middle Ages, has been mostly rejected by the church today. The problem with the Ransom Theory is that it has no Biblical basis because it sees Satan, rather than God, as the one who required that a payment be made for sin. Thus, it completely ignores the demands of God's justice as seen throughout Scripture.

Number three is Christus Victor.

Christus Victor, which is Latin for Christ the Conqueror is a theory of atonement, which states that Jesus Christ died to defeat the powers of evil (such as sin, death, and the devil) in order to free humankind from their bondage to evil. This has been and continues to be one of the most widely held theories in the church. I believe there is a lot of truth in the idea that Jesus is the conqueror, however I also think this theory is incomplete. It does not take into account the need to satisfy the righteousness of God.

Number four is The Satisfaction Theory

According to the satisfaction theory of atonement, Jesus Christ's death is understood as a death to satisfy the justice of God. Satisfaction here means restitution, the mending of what was broken, and the paying back of a debt. In this theory, Jesus Christ died in order to pay back the injustice of human sin, and to satisfy the justice of God.

This theory was developed in reaction to the historical dominance of the Ransom Theory, that God paid the devil with Christ's death. Therefore, in contrast with the Ransom Theory, this theory teaches humanity owes a debt to God.

The last theory we're going to look at is The Penal Substitutionary Theory.

Penal Substitutionary Atonement was developed during the Reformation. The Reformers, specifically Calvin and Luther took the satisfaction theory we just talked about and modified it slightly. They added a more legal framework into this notion of the cross as satisfaction. The result is that within penal substitution, Jesus Christ dies to satisfy God's wrath against human sin. Jesus is punished, therefore the word penal, which means punishment, in the place of sinners therefore the word, substitution, in order to satisfy the justice of God and the legal demand of God to punish sin. In the light of Jesus' death God can now forgive the sinner because Jesus Christ has been punished in the place of sinner, in this way meeting the requirements of God's justice. This is the most widely held theory among evangelical Christians today.

The various theories of atonement have one thing in common: God desires to be in relationship with humankind, in spite of human rebellion against God and his law of love. God initiates and restores the broken relationship through the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. The death of Christ removes the guilt of sin and sets people free to respond to God's reach toward us. The atonement of God in Jesus Christ reveals the relational character of God and the depth of his love for the world. It seems to me that most of the theories have some truth to be found in them and that there's really not just one that is right while all the others are wrong. In fact, most of us combine more than one into our understanding of what Jesus' atonement for sin means. You can tell that by the way we talk about Jesus' death.

We say things like, Jesus died to be our example. Jesus' crucifixion conquered sin and death. Jesus took our rightful place upon the cross. Jesus died so that the penalty of sin was paid for. Whichever theory or theories we believe, one this remains constant, it is God who takes the initiative to have a relationship with us by his grace.

Jesus' story doesn't end with his death. As the Creed says, "he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again."

What exactly it means to say that "Jesus descended to the dead" has long been debated in the church. The best explanation that I know of comes from theologian J. Warren Smith. He said "It means there is no part of human existence to which Christ did not 'descend.' It's what it means for Christ to take upon himself the punishment of sin, which is death. If Christ really dies, then that means he goes all the way to the place of dead."

Descending to the dead affirms that Jesus was not resuscitated, that is brought back to life, rather that Jesus was truly resurrected, that is given new life. Had Jesus not truly died and descended to the dead, then Easter Sunday is no longer miraculous.

This leads us to the last thing we are looking at today. "On the third day, he rose again." This statement should make us want to stand up and shout for joy.

I like the way The Message translation of the Bible puts 1 Corinthians 15:55-57. "Death swallowed by triumphant Life! Who got the last word, oh, Death? Oh, Death, who's afraid of you now? It was sin that made death so frightening and law-code guilt that gave sin its leverage, its destructive power. But now in a single victorious stroke of Life, all three—sin, guilt, death—are gone, the gift of our Master, Jesus Christ. Thank God!"

But how can we know this is all true? Eventually, belief in Jesus' resurrection comes down to faith. We must choose to believe. However, one of the greatest proofs of the resurrection is seen in the lives of Jesus' disciples.

Following the resurrection, they went from dejected to jubilant. When the women returned from the empty tomb with the news that Jesus was alive, Luke tells us, "But these words seemed like an idle tale, and they did not believe them." (Luke 24:11) And when Jesus met Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus, Jesus asked them what they were discussing, Luke says, "They stood still, their faces downcast. ¹One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in days?" (Luke 24:17-18)

Later, after Jesus revealed himself in the breaking of bread, they hurried back to Jerusalem, where they found the other disciples filled with joy and saying, "It's true! The Lord has risen! He has appeared to Simon!" (Luke 24:34)

The resurrection also changed the disciples from cowardly to courageous. When Jesus' was arrested, they all ran away. Peter denied knowing Jesus three times in one night. For three days, they hid in fear of the Jewish leaders. But after the resurrection, they became bold in their faith, unafraid even unto death.

According to tradition, all the apostles except John were martyred and he died in exile.

Andrew was crucified spread eagle in Greece. Bartholomew was crucified head down in India. James, the son of Alpheus was stoned and clubbed to death in Jerusalem. Matthew was chopped into pieces in Ethiopia. Philip was crucified in Syria. Simon the Zealot was crucified in Persia. Thomas was speared in India. Peter was crucified head down in Roman. James, the brother of John was beheaded in Jerusalem. And Jude was crucified in Persia.

Those don't sound like the deaths of dejected, cowardly men. Something brought a radical change into their lives, and that thing was the resurrection of Jesus.

Before we move into the question and answer time, let's take a moment to thank the Lord Jesus for this atoning sacrifice and his victory over the grave.