

“Suffering and Pilate”

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“There is always dark times, but always light too.” (Connor Dowdle, age 8)

John 19:1-16a

March 31, 2019

(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

All We Know – Pastor Paul

Today we come to the part of the Apostles’ Creed that says Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate.”

When I was in high school in Spanish class, we learned to sing “The Twelve Days of Christmas” in Spanish. Our teacher asked for volunteers to sing the different days. Deo, a tall, lanky athlete, volunteered for “Y una perdiz en un peral” (And a partridge in a pear tree). The problem was Deo’s rural southern accent, so it sounded like “ee yoonah pear deez ayn ooh pay-ral.” He then held on to that one Spanish phrase all year long. It was all he knew to say. No matter what you asked, he would say, “Ee yoonah pear deez ayn ooh pay-ral.” It was the only Spanish he knew.

Christians tend to know only one thing about suffering: “Suffering is bad, so avoid it at all costs.” That’s a very Old Testament idea of suffering. Because of Christ, we have a different perspective on suffering.

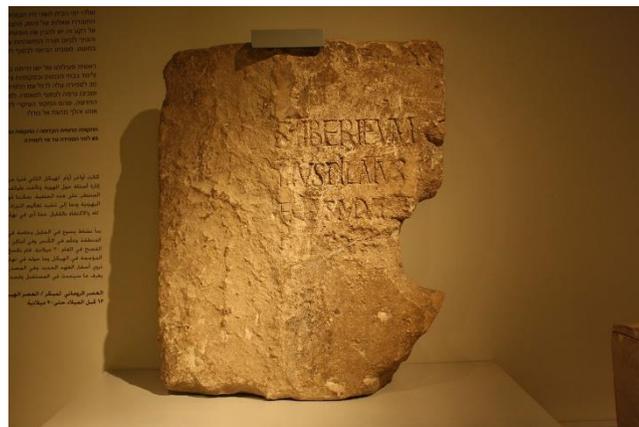
Romans 5:3-11 makes no sense apart from Jesus’ suffering on the cross. Paul writes, “We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance” (Romans 5:3, NLT). Romans 8:35-39 makes no sense apart from Jesus’ suffering. Without the cross, how could Paul ask, “Can anything ever separate us from Christ’s love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?” (Romans 8:35, NLT).

Let's look at today's text. Notice how John needs only a few lines to describe what happens. When someone suffers, the suffering can be described briefly, but it feels like it takes a life time. In *The Princess Bride*, Wesley is in the Pit of Despair, and the six-fingered man asks him, "How do you feel?" All Wesley can do is whimper in response. Our suffering is often like that. It can't be described in words.

In Christ's case John quickly recounts his suffering and it takes the whole Gospel to explain it. Isaiah 53:6 says, "The LORD laid on him the sin of us all." Jesus' suffering is magnified because it's not only physical. It's love, mercy, and grace that meet at the cross.

Pilate's Tough Spot – Pastor Bob

It's rather startling that Pilate is the only person named in the Creed other than the Trinity and Mary. His name ties this story to real history – a time and place. Caesarea Maritima, a coastal city in Israel, was the Roman headquarters during Jesus' day. Pilate only traveled to Jerusalem to conduct official business. His home was in Caesarea. If you go there today, you can see a replica of a limestone block, partially damaged, that nevertheless offers clear archaeological evidence of Pilate's name and title in the first century.



*To the Divine Augustus Tiberias
Pontius Pilate
Prefect of Judea
Dedicated This*

Pilate got this gig on the recommendation of Sejanus, a favorite of Caesar Tiberius who, by the time of Jesus' trial, apparently has been deposed and executed, along with other associates. Pilate's status and life are in jeopardy by his association with Sejanus. He's nervous, impatient, and confused, but still has the ultimate legal responsibility for what happens here.

Pilate's two main jobs were peace and control, if not loyalty. On days like this, those two values seemed in conflict. He's in a bind and he wants to get out of it.

Previously, Pilate had angered the Jews by hanging worship images of the emperor and minting coins with pagan religious symbols. He was later charged with cruelty in handling the Samaritans. Eventually he committed suicide, which may speak

to his state of mind in John 19. He may have been prone to depression. It's hard not to feel sympathy for Pilate.

Jews were allowed to follow their own law as long as it didn't conflict with Rome. They sometimes could and did administer some forms of capital punishment while the Romans looked the other way. But not crucifixion, and that's what they wanted to happen to Jesus. Besides, they wanted Rome to be responsible so they wouldn't lose favor with the people. Jesus was still popular. We're only five days from Palm Sunday, and three days since he wowed people in the temple.

The key exchanges have to do with "king," "Caesar," etc. Pilate is asking himself and the religious leaders: Is Jesus a threat toward an uprising?

Pilate doesn't see Jesus as a threat to Rome, and tries repeatedly to free him or at least not to execute him. He pushes hard on the evidence, and tries to gain sympathy with a preliminary flogging and mockery. "Here is the man" is an effort to present Jesus as a pathetic, helpless, beaten nobody.

Pilate was also religious in a Roman way, and therefore superstitious. When the Jews said Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, that terrified him even more. Am I in danger of crucifying one of the gods? That can't be good.

The Jews, on the other hand, have been planning a long time to dispense with Jesus and will not give up unless they have their way. This has been building throughout the Gospel, and they see this as their moment of opportunity. After the Lazarus story, they knew this would only grow. Judas gave them their chance. Now they're in too deep. It needs to happen, and it needs to happen today.

We find ourselves wanting innocent Jesus to be freed from this injustice, even though we know the rest of the story.

There is some scholarly debate about the timing of the Last Supper and the Passover since the other three Gospels seem to relate the story differently. What's important for John's gospel is the presentation of Jesus as the Passover Lamb. He's been setting this up since chapter one, when John the Baptist said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Our Substitute – Pastor Paul

John describes Jesus' suffering in these first three verses. Jesus was flogged with lead-tipped whips that were designed to pull flesh off. When it says he was beaten, it's not just that he was slapped. It's kind of like that situation where someone's cornered in the locker room, and you say to yourself, "Something bad's going to happen." Jesus was taken out of sight where the soldiers could have their way with him. Then they

took an acacia vine, like a really bad Christmas wreath with spiked thorns. It would have penetrated his head and come into contact with his skull.

An emotional response to Jesus' suffering is not the saving work of the Gospel. When I was growing up, we would hear many emotional appeals based on what Jesus suffered. By the time I was in Middle school, I had had been to more crusades and tent revivals where you would go and for hours be whipped into an emotional frenzy. An emotional response to Christ's suffering is not a substitute for repentance and embrace of the Gospel.

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* portrayed it graphically on film. We watch a movie like that and we get emotional because of all Jesus suffered. People in Hollywood who helped make the film made very emotional scenes, but we didn't see mass revival in Hollywood. Why? Because it was nothing but an emotional response.

Pilate brings Jesus out, beaten so badly that he was unrecognizable, as Isaiah 52 says. "Here is the man" he says in verse 6. How did the people respond? "Crucify him!" An emotional response is not the same as a response of faith.

Moms, when you had your baby, did the baby pop out and say, "Mom, thank you so much for enduring all that pain without an epidural?" No. Why? Because they are incapable of understanding the pain and suffering you went through so that they might have life. An unregenerate person will not be capable of responding to the suffering of Christ unless they understand that the suffering was substitutionary. Christ did not suffer because it was a beautiful or awful spectacle. Christ suffered in our place.

I can't say to myself that someone else's sins deserved this kind of death. In Romans 1, Paul has his readers thinking about how bad "they" are – those sinners under the wrath of God. Then in chapter 2, he says, "But you – you who judge them – you do the same things. You deserve the same judgment. Christ came and took your place, and now suffering makes sense to us.

What Changed – Pastor Bob

What Pastor Paul has preached is the Gospel. I want to turn our attention now to our suffering, and how Christ's suffering touches ours.

Preaching on suffering is a challenge because of the range of the congregation – from those who are truly suffering right now, to those who are feeling guilty because they aren't. I don't have to tell you that we Americans don't suffer like our own ancestors, much less like the Armenians during the World War I genocide, or the Jews during the Holocaust, or Christians in North Korea, Pakistan, or Somalia. We already know. But we have our own suffering, and sometimes it feels unbearable.

On the whole, the New Testament offers a radically different perspective on suffering than the Old.

Suffering in the Old Testament most often refers to slavery in Egypt, or the destruction of Israel and the Babylonian captivity. On a personal level, the book of Job presents the most dramatic story of suffering Job cries out, “I dread all my suffering” (9:23).

The New Testament radically alters this viewpoint. Paul: “We glory in our sufferings” (Romans 5:3). James says, “Consider it pure joy when you face trials of many kinds (James 5:2). Peter says, “Don’t be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12).

For the most part, in the Old Testament suffering is bad. In the New Testament suffering is good.

Everything changed in John 19 when Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate.

Why? Jesus’ suffering under Pontius Pilate was the worst suffering inflicted on the best person for the greatest good.

Some aspects of suffering did not change that day.

- *There’s still suffering.* Suffering is always relative, but it’s still there. It doesn’t matter whether it’s a food bill that can’t be paid or a generation that might be exterminated. In that moment, it’s still suffering.
- *It’s still hard.* Nothing we say today will make it easier to face suffering. That’s not the intent.
- *It’s still confusing.* We still ask why, especially in the immediate aftermath, and especially when the pain (mind or emotions) won’t go away. The price of loving is grief. The price of living is trouble. It’s still worth it, but it’s still confusing.
- *We still need help.* We call out to God, and if he won’t change it, we’ll try to find an answer somewhere else – medicine, technology, natural remedies, addictions, friends, law, money, even superstition. We can’t do this on our own.

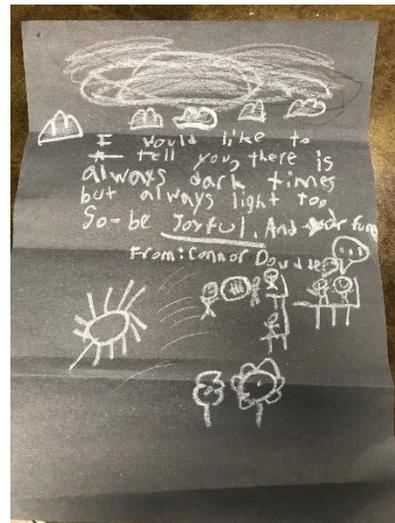
Our culture has complicated this struggle because we are living in the first generation (or so it seems to me) that assumes parents are supposed to prevent all forms of suffering for their children. My parents didn’t think that way. But if that’s what you believe, then you ask: If I love my children so much that I don’t want them to suffer, why doesn’t God, the Father who has all power, prevent my suffering? Nowhere in the New Testament do we find the message that it’s God’s intent to prevent us from suffering.

Still, there is a remarkable and permanent change in the response to suffering after John 19, when Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate. Here's what changed.

- We can never say God doesn't get it. God not only knows and cares, but he's experienced suffering personally. That was the lesson last week that Jesus became "one of us."
- *We can't protest, "But I don't deserve this!"* The gospel changes everything about worthiness, innocence, and entitlement. Instead, the Gospel frees us to admit our unworthiness and to see anything but suffering as grace.
- *Suffering is never the end of the story.* If God can redeem crucifixion, he can redeem any suffering. Sometimes in this life, sometimes in eternity.
- *We're never alone.* It's not only that God is with us, but, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12, "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it." His death gives us communion not only with God but with others. We suffer together because Christ suffered.
- *It is finished.* On the cross Jesus killed the *power* of suffering, forever. For the believer, even death has no grip on us. As Wayne Miller wrote to me this week, "It's not just that God is able and willing to save us from suffering. He already has."
- *Suffering produces fruit.* The fruit of the Spirit, Paul says in Galatians 4, is love, joy, peace, patience, and so on. The Holy Spirit produces these inexplicable and unmistakable evidences of God. You can't fake this.

I love when even children get this embedded early. This past week our Wednesday night children's ministry completed a unit on the life of Moses. The children of Corinth were asked to write a note to their leaders as they thought of Moses' leadership of the children of Israel. We got some wonderful notes of encouragement and blessing.

One of mine was from Connor Dowdle, age 8. Connor drew on black paper to represent the dark world we sometimes face, but used white letters to show that the light always shines through. He pictured clouds at the top and sunshine at the bottom, along with joyful people. He wrote my name on the outside, and on the inside said, "I would like to tell you, there is always dark times but always light too. So – be joyful!"



That's it, Connor! And it's the suffering of Christ that tells us so. Amen.