

HE SUFFERED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE

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Resources for Christ-Centered Discipleship

The oldest written English poem is written in runes, an ancient alphabet, and carved into a stone cross in Scotland. Scholars believe the sixteen-foot high cross was carved around 750 years after the time of Christ, so it is more than 1,200 years old. The lines carved into the stone are from a poem called "The Dream of the Rood." The word "rood," from the old English *rod*, was used for the gallows and especially for the cross of Christ

In this poem the author tells how, in the most treasured of dreams, he saw a strange tree. It became the cross on which Christ was crucified, and it began to speak and tell its story.

It was long ago-- I still remember,

back to the holt [a small grove] where I was hewn down;

From my own stock I was struck away,

dragged off by strong enemies,

wrought into a roadside scaffold.

They made me a hoist for wrongdoers.

The soldiers on their shoulders bore me,

until on a hilltop they raised me;

many enemies made me fast there.

Then I saw, marching toward me, Mankind's brave King.

He came to climb upon me.

I dared not break nor bend aside against

God's will, though the ground itself shook at my feet.

Then the young warrior, Almighty God, mounted the Cross,

in the sight of many. He would set free Mankind.

I shook when his arms embraced me,

but I durst not bow to ground,

stoop to Earth's surface.

Stand fast I must. I was reared up, a rood.

I held the King, Heaven's Lord, I dared not bow.

They drove me through with dark nails:

on me are the wounds, wide-mouthed hate dents.

I durst not harm any of them. They mocked us together.

I was all wet with blood sprung from the Man's side,

after he sent forth his soul.

Many wry wierds I underwent

up on that hilltop; saw the Lord of Hosts stretched out stark. Darkness shrouded the King's corpse.

A shade went out wan under cloud pall.

All creation wept, keened the King's death.

Christ was on the Cross . . .

This ancient poem is considered important not only because it is the oldest written poem in the English language but also because the author was telling the story of Christ in a culture that had glorified the idea of the heroic warrior. He wanted to show that Christ ascended the cross and endured His sufferings not as a helpless victim but as a powerful king who was suffering heroically for the salvation of the world. The poem speaks of the "warrior, Almighty God" crucified to "set free Mankind." The poem refers to Christ as "Mankind's brave King."

That points out an irony in the story of Christ. He was mocked as a king, as if His claim to be a king was ridiculous, yet He really turned out to be the king of heaven. When they nailed Him to the cross, His suffering proved to be the source of our redemption and the fulfillment of God's plan from before time. What makes the story of Christ so powerful is the fact that, as the Creed says, it tells of Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, the true king, who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

He is the one who has changed lives, including mine, and infused hearts with great hope and deep healing, and because of that has inspired great poetry and painting in every culture and in every century. His story is not just a story. It's what the Bible calls the gospel, a story full of life-giving power for those who receive it. But it isn't always recognized or received. That's part of the Palm Sunday story, and that's part of the lesson of the Scriptures here in John 19.

What's clear in these verses is that . . .

Sometimes What Christ Gets from Us Is Surprising Hostility

In John 19:5-6, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, has had Jesus severely beaten, cruelly scourged, crowned with thorns, and mocked, hoping the crowd will be satisfied with that, but they aren't. They shout for Jesus to be crucified. Pilate offered to release Him earlier, at the end of chapter 18, but they do not want Him released; they want Him crucified.

Pilate speaks to Jesus again, and again he tries to set Him free, but they shout, "Take him away! Crucify him!" That's surprisingly hostile. What had Jesus done to deserve such surprising hostility? Scripture tells us that Jesus *often* stirs up hostility.

Many people fool themselves into thinking they're just indifferent toward God, when they are really more hostile than they know. They will say, "I'm not hostile to God, I'm just indifferent." But the truth is, the God that they are indifferent toward is a harmless God of their own imagination.

What Jesus shows us is that when the real God shows up, He doesn't negotiate. He doesn't just sit down and say, "Let's try to work out something we can both agree on with respect to your life's values and direction. Let's have a discussion. What do you think would be a good way to use your money, your words, your sexuality, your body, your imagination, and emotions?"

Do you think Jesus' approach is to say, "What do *you* think? Do you think you would feel OK with maybe sleeping with a couple of different people until you are sure that you find the right one? How would *you* feel about lying only occasionally and just not letting it become habitual? And as far as loving people from different cultures or races, I thought it was a good idea, but if it's inconvenient for you, just don't worry about it. I don't want you to feel pressured."

Does Jesus *ever* talk like that? No. He shows up and says, "I'm the Lord, and I'm calling you to believe in Me and follow Me, and here's what that means."

It's easy to be apathetic toward a harmless, inoffensive, undemanding God of your own imagination. But Jesus didn't allow people the luxury of their illusions. Jesus presented Himself as God in human flesh, the one true king who deserves our loyal love and allegiance. The result was that He was either recognized and received or hated and rejected.

The powerful and positive message of eternal life and forgiveness that Jesus preached was offensive to many people. Jesus said that even if you are a religious person who thinks you are better than other people, the truth is you are lost without *Him*. Without His grace, we are *all* on a path that leads to destruction and damnation. Unless we lay aside our pride and feelings of superiority and turn

to Christ, receiving Him as Lord and Savior, there will be no hope for us in the long run. In Jesus' day the people who thought themselves better than others were especially offended by that. They still are.

Christ comes into our world asking for faith, humility, and submission, and many people, if they take that seriously, respond with hostility. Check your own heart. How willing are you to really let Christ be king in your life?

The crowd shows us that sometimes what Christ gets from us is hostility. The portrait of Pilate teaches us something else. What we see in Pilate is that . . .

Sometimes What Christ Gets from Us Is a Desperate Attempt at Compromise

Three times in these verses Pilate says that he finds no basis for a charge against Jesus. Now if that is true, then the right thing to do is just to let Jesus go. Verse 12 says that is what Pilate tries to do. But in the end he does not set Jesus free because he doesn't want to offend the crowd. He keeps trying to find a compromise. He wants to cut a deal. He tries to go along with the crowd to a certain degree but not go all the way with them. He has Jesus scourged. But that is not enough. In the end, in spite all his attempts at compromise, he hands Jesus over.

If we are honest, we must admit that Pilate is a lot like all of us. We don't live with the intention of denying Jesus, doing evil, damaging our souls. But how often are we double-minded? How often do we resist commitment to Christ as we search for comfortable compromises?

It's possible to sacrifice Christ and His cause for what seem at the time to be very good reasons. Pilate could have argued that what he did was justified in light of the situation. He had good reason to be afraid that if he didn't satisfy the Jews, there would be some serious disturbance, and it was his job to keep the peace. He had good reason to be afraid that if he didn't satisfy the crowd, they would appeal to Caesar and claim that he was disloyal by refusing to execute a man who claimed to be the true king. Caesar, way off in Rome, wouldn't understand the complexities of the situation.

So Pilate could easily justify what he did and probably could have found many friends who would have agreed and assured him that he really didn't have any other choice.

I'm pretty sure that at some point a sentence must have formed in Pilate's mind that went something like this: "I *have* to hand Jesus over to be crucified because, if I don't, I'll suffer the consequences."

Have you been saying something like that?

- “I have to lie, because if I don't I'll lose my job or this deal?”
- “I have to go along with my friends, because if I don't they'll think I'm a kook and won't want to be friends.”
- “I have to choose not to give or serve sacrificially, because if I don't I won't have the life I really want and need?”
- “I have to hold onto an unhealthy, unchristian relationship, because if I don't I will be lonely and sad.”
- “I have to keep worrying and working this much or else the bottom will fall out of my life.”

Christ calls us to a radically different life of faith that sets us free from all those falsehoods. But too often, instead of letting go of the lies that keep us entangled and enslaved in our own fears, we search desperately for some compromise that doesn't require such an absolute commitment to faith and to Him.

There's a place for compromise in human relationships, but when it comes to Christ, you don't compromise. You commit to Him. What Christ deserves from us is nothing less than faith and love.

The crowd shows us hostility. Pilate shows us compromise. The third portrait in this part of the story is of Jesus Himself. Jesus shows us why He deserves our faith and love. And the apostle John, who tells the story as the Spirit of God guides him, stands behind the story as a silent witness to another way to respond to Jesus--the response of faith and love.

Christ Deserves Our Faith and Love Because of What, How, and Why He Suffered

What Did He Suffer?

John 19:1-3 says, “Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ And they struck him in the face.”

We know from history that this was brutal. The flogging, or scourging, was done with a whip that had multiple leather thongs fitted with pieces of bone or metal. The beatings were so savage and the ripping and lacerations so deep that the victims often died.

After the scourging, Jesus was crucified. Verse 16 says, “Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called

Golgotha). Here they crucified him, and with him two others--one on each side and Jesus in the middle."

Crucifixion was a horrible way to die, but for Jesus physical death was not the greatest horror. The only cry of desperation that came from Jesus during this entire ordeal was when darkness came over Him and He cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?" He suffered not only physically but spiritually.

Inwardly, spiritually, He suffered the experience of hell and damnation compressed into those last three hours on the cross. He took and felt the full impact of the judgment of a holy God on a world of ugly sins. He suffered the judgment we deserve and was forsaken by God as He paid for our sins.

How Did He Suffer?

He suffered willingly. In verse 10 Pilate says, "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" In verse 11 Jesus answers, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." In effect, Christ is saying something like this, "Pilate, you don't see clearly what is really happening here. You think you are the powerful one, but really you are a small piece of a larger plan."

Jesus was making two points:

First, Pilate, who thought he was so powerful, was really having this whole crisis imposed on him by the crowd and by Caiaphas, the religious leader who sent Jesus to him. Their sin was greater than Pilate's because they were imposing this situation on him and were more malicious and willful in it than he was.

Second, even in this situation, any power Pilate did have over Jesus was power that has been given to him by God for God's greater purposes. Verse 11 says, "Jesus answered, 'You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.'"

Jesus understood that the absolute sovereignty of God was working in and through all kinds of human choices and circumstances. The Bible stresses this, because God wants us to understand that He was giving His Son for us, Christ was willingly giving Himself for us, and the Holy Spirit was working out the will of God in all of the earthly circumstances and dynamics.

Christ suffered horribly, but He suffered willingly.

Why Did He Suffer?

Christ suffered to redeem us. When Jesus came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, He knew He was not going to a coronation but to a crucifixion. He told

His disciples earlier that His dying on the cross was not only a certainty but also a necessity. Why? Because He came to reconcile us to God, to redeem our souls! In order to do that He had to die on the cross to pay for your sins.

The reason the Apostles' Creed goes right from the birth of Jesus to His sufferings is because if we don't understand the necessity of the cross we will never understand the meaning of the life of Jesus. The cross tells us that our sins are so bad that redemption created a problem even for God Almighty. Therefore Jesus *had* to die for us, and it's only through the cross of Christ that we can come to God and be at peace with Him.

God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. "Let there be stars in the sky," and there were stars in the sky. "Let there be the deep waters teeming with fish and great whales and sea creatures," and it was so. But God could not just say, "Let there be forgiveness!" When God determined to redeem fallen humanity, it took an incredible plan that unfolded over several millenniums and culminated in the cross and the resurrection of Christ.

You don't have to fully understand all the reasons, but at some true level you have to accept the fact of the necessity of the cross or else you turn it into nonsense.

Let's suppose that after the worship service this morning I say to all you, "You know I love you all, and I want to show you how much I love you. Come out to the front of the church with me." And I lead you out to the edge of Williamson Boulevard. I wait for a big bus to come along, and then I say, "I love you all this much," and throw myself in front of the bus.

Would you say, "Wow, there's a man who really loved us"? Would you write songs about that and say, "When I survey the wondrous bus"?

No, you would say, "Poor Pastor Larry. What was wrong with him?" My dying for you under those circumstances doesn't show you the depth and reality of my love, because it's senseless. Listen, if people could get to God on their own, by just trying harder, the cross of Jesus Christ would be senseless. It is either nonsense, or it is amazing grace. It isn't nonsense. It is amazing grace.

This is a world in rebellion against its only rightful king. It is not a rebellion of good people against an evil king. It is a rebellion of selfish and foolish people against a wise and gracious king. Now the king against whom the world has rebelled has come revealing amazing love and grace, because He has come with an offer of peace, an offer of total amnesty for all rebels and not only pardon but reconciliation. He was willing to suffer the consequences of your sins so that you could be reconciled to Him.

God wants you to know that you don't have to deserve His love. You don't have to earn His grace. You never did, and you never could. It's grace precisely because we don't deserve it.

Galatians 2:20 puts it very personally. "I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." Do you believe that personally? If so, then you believe something that has incredible power to inspire and change you. So believe it personally, deeply, and boldly.

Believe it in the teeth of temptation, so that it strengthens your commitment to obedience.

Believe it in the face of hardships, so that it inspires you to trust and obey.

Believe it every hour of every day, so that you can live your life glorifying God and tasting the empowering fullness of His love given to you in Christ.

That's what you were made for, and that is what Christ came for.

More than a thousand years after "The Dream of the Rood," another English poet inspired by the story of the cross wrote a poem that was set to music. We still sing it today. His name was Isaac Watts, and his poem was "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross."

When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of Glory died
My richest gain I count but loss
and pour contempt on all my pride
Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a present far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all!