

Unlocking Scripture: The Apostles' Creed, Pt. 5
Suffered Under Pontius Pilate
I Timothy 6: 11-16

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A few weeks ago, I took a quick trip to Nashville to see my old college roommate. He was recovering from surgery. We talked for 8 hours straight. In the course of the conversation, he said, “Oh Gerry, I’m weary. Just weary.”

“I know, Keeter,” I replied, “It’s a lot.”

My old college roommate’s name isn’t Keeter, it’s Keith. He’s got about half a page of titles and degree letters after his name now. He’s a big deal at Vanderbilt Medical School. But I call him Keeter. Because I have for 40 years. And, well, because it’s good for him!

He calls me Gerry. Because he’s always known the baby boy in me, how little Gerry wants his way. And because he’s called me that for 40 years. And, well, it’s good for me.

Yes, he’s weary. Maybe it’s partly because they imploded one of the towers we lived in at college. We drove by the hole. What once was new is now explodable. Sort of like us: there are people younger, faster, shinier on the way. Maybe it’s because his career has been long and demanding, and he’s still working full out. Keith has also known sorrow. A decade ago he lost his beloved wife and the mother of his children to a bizarre, sudden infection. He has a child who’s been through marriage sorrows. He’s getting over cancer surgery. But more, the tide of our secularized culture wears on him as he tries to be a Christian in a difficult environment. The culture implodes like our old dorm. But even more, the hypocrisy and shallowness in the Christian community just plain tires him out. He’s weary. That’s the way of the world. Keith knows what M. Scott Peck meant when he began his book *The Road Less Travelled* with the words, “Life is difficult.” Yes, it is. For all of us. We wear out. We live weary.

But there’s news for the worn and weary: Jesus knows. He’s been through it and come out the other side. The next episode in the story of the Apostles’ Creed says, “He suffered under Pontius Pilate.”

What does that mean to suffer under someone? I remember as a kid literally suffering under Danny Stewart. That's the guy I told you about a few weeks ago who taunted me with "Fake, fake, toy, toy, toy" when I told him my stuffed animals were real. Other times, 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 them. I knew what it was to be literally under Danny's power—and girth.

Jesus suffered under the weight of the authority of the Roman governor of his region. Pontius Pilate held his position from AD 26 to 36. His job was to keep the peace. To pacify the occupied nation of the Jews under the enforced peace of the Roman Empire. 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." From insurance companies to bureaucrats to school administrations to those who keep the social gates. 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.

In Paul's first 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, steadfastness, and 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 actual 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.

I'm thinking of a week one summer when the burden of Pilate's rule fell especially upon me. The week started out with prayer time with a friend. Tears filled my eyes as I heard him share the sufferings of his daughter. The wild, jerky journey of mental illness. "It's like we're riding the crazy train in our house," he told me. "We're trapped in an Ozzie Osbourne song and going off the rails."

My own father's heart broke to hear him. And the week went on with a cascade of people's suffering under the way the world is: another shattered marriage; another hopeless financial situation; yet another wretched, damnable cancer; another journey into grief; more pain, and still more pain.

That's not abnormal for a ministry week. But this time it got to me. The voice of doubt spoke within me, "Boy, what does your religion have to say about all this? It doesn't look to me like your 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 started to wilt under the internal assault. As I wrestled with that voice, I instinctively put my hand on the little bronze cross that hangs against my chest. Jesus has been through this. 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.

Another voice spoke inside me. The Holy Spirit. *Jesus is here.* I visualized each horrible situation. *He is here. He is here.* I felt the cross under my shirt again. It is very old, centuries old. Others, many others perhaps, have worn this cross. 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 every other little tyrant who tried to rule over his own patch of hell on earth.

The accuser, however, kept after me. Pilate's words to Jesus rose in my mind, "Do you not know that I have the authority?" Powers beyond my control age me, sicken me, trample me, discard me. Treasures evaporate; love gets stolen; little ones get crushed. Hell threatens to gobble up everything. "Do you not know I rule?"

Locked in the dialogue of this inner struggle, I touched the cross one more time. "No," I whispered, "You do not. Jesus said, 'You would have no authority over me unless it had been given to you from above.'" Jesus is Lord. Not Pilate or Satan or any other name evil goes by." I drew 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 precisely by dying, he 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 suffered life under the way things are. It was God who let a petty official send him 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."¹ He made our weary life and our inevitable death his own. And then he came out the other side.

Think what comfort you have to offer those around you. Jesus 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 are weary from the wear and tear of this world can know they are not alone. God is not aloof. He has been there. He is still here. 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. He is here, now, right in the midst of all it. He is here, and he is Lord. He is love. He is with you.

¹ Thomas Torrance, "Preaching Christ Today" in *A Passion for Christ*, Gerrit Dawson and Jock Stein, eds., (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1999), p. 13.