

the ESSENTIALS



WHAT ALL CHRISTIANS BELIEVE AND WHY IT MATTERS

Part 4: I believe in Jesus' redemptive death | Pastor Joe Wittwer | Feb. 9, 2009

Note: We have *Fireproof* <http://www.fireproofthemovie.com/> available for checkout if you feel it would benefit your group or particular couples to watch it. Contact us at jodie@lifecenter.net.

A. Fellowship Time (10-15 minutes)

1. Chitchat. Perhaps offer coffee, tea, or a cold drink with some snacks.
2. Pray (or invite someone to pray) to open the discussion.

B. Review Time (Read the summary below to the group: 5-10 minutes)

This series began last December as we started walking our way through the Apostles' Creed, which is a summary of beliefs. We're looking at these essential articles of faith so that we will *know* what we believe, *live* what we believe, and know what's essential and what's not. We have begun each talk in this series with this reminder: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." [Read the attached Apostles' Creed.] Let's look at another essential from the Creed: **I believe in Jesus Christ... who... suffered under Pontius Pilate was crucified, died, and was buried.** This statement is the focus of today's discussion.

1. What He did. Jesus came to rescue us from our sins, and Jesus' death is central to that rescue mission. He was born to die . . . for us. The final weeks of His life were spent preparing others for his death and resurrection, and almost half of the gospels focus on those events. What specifically happened during that time?

a. He suffered under Pontius Pilate. Pontius Pilate took no responsibility for the suffering and death of Jesus, even though he knew Jesus was an innocent man. Jesus suffered the fate of crucifixion because of not only Pontius Pilate, but because of every one of us. But here is the big surprise: ultimately it was God who killed Jesus. **Isaiah 53:10** records, "*Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer . . .*" Likewise, **Acts 2:23** reports, "*This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.*" In **John 10:17-18** Jesus says, "*The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.*" So why is Pontius Pilate mentioned in the Creed? Because the Creed is rooted in history. Naming Pilate helps show the historical nature of the news within the Bible. The gospel isn't just about *ideas*; it is about *God acting in history*. It's good *news*, not just good *views*. Jesus suffered extensively physically on His way to and during His crucifixion. Why is His suffering important? Have you ever heard people say, "How can God allow so much evil and suffering in the world? We can't believe in a God who stays safely in heaven while all this suffering goes on." God didn't stay safely in heaven. He came to earth and suffered, and in His suffering He took upon Himself all the pain and suffering of the world.

b. He was crucified. Crucifixion was brutal and torturous. It was painful and degrading. No wonder many people in the first century reacted with disgust or disbelief at the Christians' suggestion that they should worship a crucified man. But the author of **Hebrews 12:2** knows better: "*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*" All Jesus' torture was endured for us.

c. He died and was buried. Jesus suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried. He was dead when taken down from the cross. To be sure of that, the Roman executor stabbed a spear into His side, just below his heart. He wasn't sleeping, He hadn't fainted, and He was truly dead. He was resurrected *from the dead!* This was what happened. But what does it mean?

2. Why did He do it? The New Testament tells us why Jesus did so much for us. It uses a rich variety of language drawn from different arenas in life. These include the following: *Propitiation*: a word from the temple. It means to appease someone. Christ's death was a propitiation for our sins. *Redemption*: a word from the marketplace. To redeem is to buy back, to pay a ransom. Christ died to redeem us, free us from slavery. *Justification*: a word from the courtroom. To justify is to declare someone just, or not guilty. Christ died to pay our debt. *Reconciliation*: a word from the family. To reconcile is to turn enemies into friends, to repair a broken relationship. We all have a broken relationship with God, and Christ died to bring us back to God. Furthermore, the New Testament talks about how Jesus died for our atonement, salvation, and forgiveness. And there are other reasons as well! Let's focus on just two:

a. He died to be our example. [Read **1 Peter 2:20-23** together.] Jesus trusted in God, His Father. He didn't make threats or fight back when He was persecuted. Yes, He died for taking that approach! [Read **Isaiah 53:3-6** together.] But God also raised Him from the dead. Nothing is more opposed to our natural instincts than this command not to resist, but to bear unjust suffering and overcome evil with good. It's hard? Are you suffering unjustly? Jesus left you an example that you should follow in His steps. Trust yourself to God. We can't do this on our own, so we need something more than an example.

b. He died to be our savior. **1 Peter 2:24** says, *"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed."* In His death, Jesus took all our sins upon Himself, as we saw in **Isaiah 53**. This prophecy about the Suffering Servant was written almost 700 years before Christ. Jesus and the early Christians all believed that it pointed to Jesus and was fulfilled by Jesus. It states we are all sheep that have gone astray. We have all wandered far from our Father, gotten crazy lost, and need to be rescued. This is why Jesus died: to bring us back to God. **1 Peter 3:18** says, *"For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God."* The gospel is the surprising story of the world's greatest rescue operation. This is the good news! Christ died for our sins to bring us back to God.

C. Life Group Questions (select, revise, and add as desired: 20-40 minutes)

1. Christians have said for centuries, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." Why is this statement important to keep in mind when talking about beliefs?
2. Reflect on the thought that Jesus was born to die, and He KNEW it. Read **John 10:17-18** above again. Ultimately it was God who killed Jesus. This surprising statement probably has aspects that both bother you and leave you in awe and wonder. Talk about your varied responses to it.
3. How does God's choice to endure great suffering (Hebrews 12:2 above) answer the argument that there cannot be a good God with such suffering in the world?
4. Read **1 Peter 2:18-3:7** together. To the extent that you can without gossip or slander, talk about areas in your life where God is asking you to knowingly sacrifice. What are some situations in which you need God's motivation and strength to endure injustice in order to overcome evil with good? Given the direction from 1 Peter, what are possible "good" responses to your present circumstances?

D. Personal Application (1-3 Minutes)

- Continue memorizing, or reviewing your memory of, the Apostles' Creed. (And make a note in your calendar or journal to practice a bit this week!)
- Make a note of how you can follow Jesus' example in your own life, through offering forgiveness, reconciliation, and unconditional love, even if it's not "deserved."

E. Prayer Time (As a whole group or subgroups of 3-4: 10-15 Minutes)

- Thank God for choosing to humble Himself and join us in our humanity so we could truly know Him and see what He had created us to be as human beings.
- Pray for God to help us focus on the essentials of our faith in Him.
- Bring any other praises and requests before the Lord that arose during your discussion.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth,

and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:

Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into hell. The third day He arose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,
whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church, the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting. Amen.

For further reading on Christian doctrine:

- *The Faith: What Christians Believe, Why They Believe it, and Why it Matters*, Charles Colson and Harold Fickett, Zondervan, 2008.
- *Christian Basics: An Invitation to Discipleship*, John Stott, Baker, 1991.
- *Basic Christianity*, John Stott, InterVarsity Press.
- *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*, N. T. Wright, Harper, 2006.
- *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis, Macmillan, 1952.
- *Christian Theology in Plain Language*, Bruce Shelley, Word, 1985

For further reading on the Apostles' Creed:

- *The Apostles' Creed*, William Barclay, Knox, 1998.
- *I Believe: Exploring the Apostles Creed*, Alister McGrath, Intervarsity Press, 1997.
- *Affirming the Apostles' Creed*, J. I. Packer, Crossway, 2008.
- *Credo: Believing in Something to Die For*, Ray Pritchard, 2005.