

SERMON TITLE: "I Believe Jesus Suffered & Died" (*The Apostles' Creed* series)  
SERMON TEXT: Hebrews 2:10-18  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: January 20, 2019, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the comic strips that I read regularly is *Zits*. Day after day, I read about the trials and tribulations of Jeremy's high school adolescence. Despite the fact that he has very capable and loving parents, to Jeremy, his dentist dad and his housewife mom seem entirely too old-fashioned, they expect him to do far too many chores, and they embarrass him constantly. Despite the fact that he knows he has big school projects coming up, Jeremy frequently leaves his homework until the last minute and has to suffer by staying up all night to get it done. Jeremy has a girlfriend named Sara, and sometimes her hope that he would be considerate of her feelings seems like a terrible burden. In this week's wintery storyline, Jeremy ran his van off the road and got stuck in a snowbank. The poor guy has such a hard time.

In one of the older comic strips, Jeremy was having a conversation with his best friend Pierce. Sitting on the floor, looking depressed, Jeremy complains, "My childhood was incredibly bland." In the second frame, he elaborates, "No drama. No heartbreak. No triumph over adversity." The third frame shows Jeremy with his hands over his face in despair. He bemoans, "Nothing but wall-to-wall middle-class comfort and security!" In the last frame, his friend Pierce reflects philosophically, "Whoa! The suffering of never having suffered!" "No wonder I'm so cranky," concludes Jeremy.\*

Well, the definition of suffering is relative, isn't it? A homeless person or a foreign migrant fleeing poverty and violence might have something quite different to say. Even our parents who had to walk five miles uphill both ways to school wouldn't let us get away with Jeremy's cranky "suffering." But, still, suffering is something all us human beings experience in one way or another. And Jesus was no exception to that.

In this New Year's sermon series on *The Apostles' Creed*, we began on January 6 with "I believe in God." We noted the Christian belief in only one God who is the creator of all things. On January 13, we affirmed, "I believe in Jesus Christ" as God's Son who is both fully divine and fully human. We noted that this belief is more than an intellectual assent, but also a heartfelt devotion to Jesus our Lord.

We're not done with Jesus yet, though. Of the 15 lines of *The Apostles' Creed*, nine of them are about Jesus. So, today, we'll continue to describe Jesus with the lines that he "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried." Using Hebrews 2 as our scriptural text, let's consider what it means to say, "I believe Jesus suffered and died."

### **1—JESUS SUFFERED AS A PERFECTING PIONEER**

Let's begin with Hebrews 2:10. In that verse we see, first of all, that Jesus suffered as a perfecting pioneer. This was God's plan for God's Son, who was "for a little time was made lower than the angels."<sup>(2:9)</sup> Even though Hebrews 1:3 tells us that Jesus was "the reflection of God's very being," Hebrews 2:10 tells us that God also wanted to perfect Jesus through his human sufferings. As Jesus suffered insults and rejection in life and the tragic injustice and horrific pain of his death on the cross, Jesus grew in his own perfection and holiness. He also increased in his ability to be "the pioneer and perfecter"<sup>(12:2)</sup> of the faith of the rest of God's children. Hebrews describes Jesus like an older brother who leads the rest of us to God's salvation, sanctification, and glory.

In chapter five, verses seven through nine, Hebrews tells us that, "in the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and [Jesus] was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."

We can readily see that this belief about Jesus is also a belief about ourselves. Maybe you've heard the saying that you can't be a leader unless you have followers. Well, the only way we can say

that Jesus suffered as a perfecting pioneer is if we actually follow him in that suffering. We must ask ourselves if we too are willing to allow God to use our hardships to help us become more holy. Are we willing to endure troubles in order to follow our pioneer Jesus to the salvation and perfection of God?

## **2—JESUS SUFFERED AS A TEST OF FAITH**

When we confess, “I believe Jesus suffered and died,” a second meaning that we see in Hebrews 2:18 is that Jesus suffered as a test of faith. By “test of faith” I don’t mean that *God* caused suffering to happen for no other reason than a capricious test. A lot of suffering and death is the result of natural causes or accidental bad luck. Other suffering and death is the consequence of our own ignorance, stubbornness, or disobedience. But that’s certainly not always true. The context of Hebrews and the entire New Testament is clear that Jesus didn’t suffer because of any mistakes on his part. Jesus’ suffering, and some of ours, is due to injustices in the social system and human cruelty. Whatever the cause of calamity, however, every situation provides an opportunity to test our faith. And Jesus’ suffering and death clearly came to him as a test that challenged and proved his reliance on God.

One theologian that I was reading this past week made the comparison between Jesus and Adam. The author pointed out that, when Adam ate the forbidden fruit, he failed the test of faith because he wanted to become like God, free from human limitations and restrictions. The consequence for Adam’s disobedience was suffering and death. In contrast, God’s Son Jesus freely accepted his humanity and his limitations. While Jesus didn’t run toward death before he was ready, neither did he shy away from his mortality. When Jesus perceived what his calling was, and that God was asking him to be faithful to that calling—even if it meant challenging the Jewish and Roman powers and putting his life at inevitable risk—Jesus didn’t shy away from suffering and death. He prepared himself and his disciples and continued on with his important work. And when the consequences came, Jesus faced his accusers. He accepted their judgment. And he went to the cross in peace, all the while keeping and proving his faith.

On this three-day weekend, we are reminded of Martin Luther King, Jr. Like Jesus, King had suffered all kinds of attempts to shut him down. He'd been persecuted and thrown in jail. For years, he had received threats against his family and himself. The death threats escalated in the early months of 1968. Those threats haunted him and certainly gave him pause. And yet King so believed in the cause of civil rights that he continued to give speeches and organize people. At the time of his assassination, King was in Memphis, Tennessee, to support sanitation workers who were on strike for living wages. A few days before, King had said, "Cowardice asks the question—is it safe? Conscience asks the question—is it right?" King knew his life was becoming very fragile, but instead of trying to save his life so he could be like the immortal God, Martin Luther King, Jr., faced his mortality, embraced the actions he believed were God's will, and was murdered on April 4, 1968.

Suffering and death are human experiences from which none of us can escape. But in the case of Jesus, and hopefully many more of us, suffering can also be a test that proves our faith.

### **3—JESUS SUFFERED AS AN ATONING SACRIFICE**

So, Jesus suffered, firstly, as a perfecting pioneer and, secondly, as a test of faith. Hebrews 2:17 points out a third meaning of "I believe Jesus suffered and died." Jesus also suffered as an atoning sacrifice.

I have to say to you that there are many different ways that the biblical writers and theologians have understood the atoning work of Christ. Only one of those ways is to think of him like a sacrificial lamb that the Jewish priests offered in the temple to persuade God to forgive the sins of the people. Other ways that Jesus has worked for our atonement have been described as the moral influence of Christ, as a positive example—much as the perfecting pioneer or the Jesus who was faithful to obey God's will even if his obedience inevitably led to his death on the cross. But, throughout Christian history, the sacrificial or substitutionary theory of atonement has been widely believed and embraced by many Christians.

Personally, I have a lot of trouble with the idea that God would require the sacrifice of a life in order to forgive us, or that God would require someone to die in our place. I say that partly because Christ's sacrifice or substitution doesn't seem fair, and I say it partly because I don't think of God in that way. I believe God loves all of us and that God wants very much to be merciful and draw us close to God's heart. I don't believe that God needs to be persuaded to do this.

But I also know that sometimes the actions that get our *human* attention are those which are so gracious, so unmerited, and so selfless that we can't help but perceive that the action was done as a sacrifice or substitution for us. While I don't believe that God's sense of justice required that his Son be violently tortured to death on a cross, I certainly can believe that the terrible human injustice of Jesus' crucifixion wakes us up to the realization that we are sinners individually and as a human society, and that Christ's self-giving life, ministry, and forgiveness can be the bridge that connects us to God.

If that's what the writer to the Hebrews meant by making a sacrifice of atonement, then I certainly believe Jesus did that. Jesus suffered and died as an atoning sacrifice that would open our hearts to the merciful and saving grace of God.

### **CONCLUSION**

I'll wrap this up by quoting some lyrics from the hymn "O Crucified Redeemer":

*O crucified Redeemer, whose lifeblood we have spilt,  
to you we raise our guilty hands, and humbly own our guilt . . .  
We hear your cry of anguish, we see your life outpoured  
where battlefields run red with blood, our neighbors' blood, O Lord . . .  
O crucified Redeemer, these are your cries of pain;  
O may they break our selfish hearts, and love come in to reign.* (Timothy Rees, 1946)

May Jesus, our perfecting pioneer who passed the test of faith with flying colors, show us the sacrificial way to atoning grace. These are the things we Apostles' Creed Christians mean when we say, "I believe Jesus suffered and died."