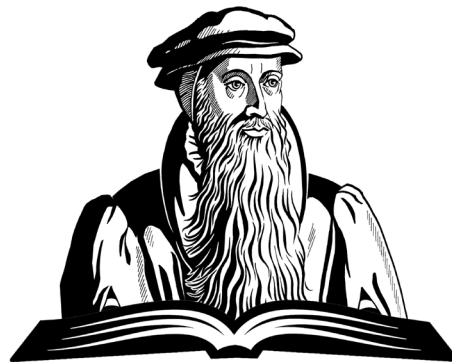

VIDEO LECTURE MODULE: THE APOSTLES' CREED

LECTURE 5 ARTICLE 4: THE SUFFERING OF CHRIST

Lecturer Presenter: Rev. Cornelis Harinck



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module

THE APOSTLES' CREED

13 LECTURES

Lecturer Presenter: Rev. Cornelis Harinck

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THE APOSTLES' CREED

Rev. Cornelis Harinck

Transcript—Lecture 5

Article 4: The Suffering of Christ

Beloved listener, the fourth article of the Apostles' Creed confesses the following concerning our Lord Jesus Christ, "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell."

The Creed states, in the first place, that Jesus suffered. The suffering in this world confronts us with profound questions. Throughout the ages, the question has been asked, how there could be so much suffering in a world that is governed by a God of infinite omnipotence and perfect goodness? As the omnipotent One, he should be able to keep us from being subjected to disasters, illnesses, suffering, and death. Should God, in his goodness, not be unwilling that his creatures should suffer as much as they do? And yet, God makes us to suffer. As soon as one speaks to an unbeliever about God, he or she will object by saying, "If your God is as good and as powerful as you say, why does he fail to do something about all the suffering in this world?" They will say to you, "I will have nothing to do with a God who allows people to suffer."

What should we answer such people? In the first place, that suffering has a cause. The Bible posits that suffering and death are the result of sin. Due to the disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, a dreadful evil has invaded the world—namely, sin. Only when we take this into account, can we explain the reality of suffering and death. There was a time when there was no suffering—all was well. We read in Genesis 1, verse 31: "And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good." There was no suffering in the world God had created. However, by having sinned, man has brought suffering and death into the world.

After the fall in sin, God spoke to Eve, "I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in sorrow you shall bring forth children" (Genesis 3:16). And to Adam he said, "Because you have harkened unto the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree, of which I commanded you, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for your sake; in sorrow you shall you eat of it all the days of your life; . . . dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Genesis 3:17 and 19). Suffering and death is the result of sin. Paul writes, in Romans 5, verse 12, "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin." Were it not for sin, death would never have had a beginning. Sin is the womb of our sorrows and sufferings. We always must, with all our questions, go back to the fall of Adam and Eve in Paradise. All suffering must be traced back to that one act of representative disobedience of our first parents in the garden of Eden. We must view sin as being the cause of suffering and death. Where sin is, there must be suffering and death. Without taking this in account, suffering is a great mystery.

There is, however, one example of extraordinary suffering and fearful dying, to which this truth does not apply. It is the suffering of Jesus. There was no sin in him. Scripture speaks of him as he "who knew no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21). He was sinless, perfect, and pure. Yet this perfect, undefiled, and holy Jesus suffered. The people despised and hated him. The devils tempted him. God forsook him. He died a criminal's death—the painful and cursed death of crucifixion. It is the mystery of all mysteries—the most profound and darkest of all God's ways. How could such a perfect man, who had never known or committed sin, but always loved God above all, and his neighbor as himself, suffer so intensely and die such a terrible death?

The only correct resolution of this mystery is articulated in the Biblical doctrine of the atonement, as secured by Christ's suretyship and substitution. In 2 Corinthians 5, verse 21, we read, "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of

God in him.” Jesus suffered. He is called the man of sorrows. Isaiah speaks of the Messiah as “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3). Jesus suffered physically. He underwent hunger and thirst, fatigue and pain. He was spit upon and degraded. He was flogged and pummeled, and he died a most grievous death by way of crucifixion.

However, Jesus suffered preeminently in his soul. He was mocked, slandered, scorned, denied, betrayed, and reviled. He suffered due to Satan’s temptations, the denial of Peter, the betrayal of Judas, and the rejection of his own people. He suffered due to God’s holy wrath that was provoked by sin. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he was so anxious and troubled about the cup he had to drink, that his sweat became as large drops of blood falling to the earth, and he declared, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death” (Matthew 26:38). He knew what lay before him. Jesus felt and bore the terrible wrath of God against sin. He suffered due to being forsaken of God on the cross. He cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

And why was he subjected to such suffering? It was because he took upon himself the sins of his people. In Psalm 40, we hear the Messiah say, “Sacrifice and offering thou did not desire; . . . Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me” (Psalm 40:6–7). When the Son of man saw that all the sacrifices could not take away sin and save the elect from the righteous vengeance of God, he declared himself willing to become their Substitute. Thus he had to endure God’s wrath against sin in their place. Peter testifies, “For Christ also hast once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God”—1 Peter 3, verse 18. Jesus’ suffering was vicarious. He suffered as the Surety and Mediator of his people. Isaiah spoke of this, saying, “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). His intense suffering was not due to his personal sins, but rather, due to our sins and crimes. He was wounded, not for his transgressions, but rather, for our transgressions. He was bruised, not for his iniquities, but rather, for our iniquities. He endured our punishment. He took upon him the curse of the law, which we had transgressed.

It shows us the amazing love of Christ, of which the apostle says, “For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commandeth his love towards us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”—Romans 5, verses 7 and 8. And as the good Shepherd, he gave his life for his sheep (John 10:11). The doctrine of substitution may be despised by the ungodly. Proud sinners may say, “Someone else need not to die for my sins.” However, it is the greatest amazement of the repenting and believing sinner, to behold Jesus dying for his sins. They look with wonder and say, “He took my place. He bore my sins and endured my punishment.”

The Apostles’ Creed says, “he suffered under Pontius Pilate.” Of the many forgotten names, the name of Pontius Pilate will always be remembered, as belonging to the man who was responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. However, Jesus did not merely suffer under Pontius Pilate. His entire life was a life of suffering. Why then does the Apostles’ Creed confine his sufferings to that which occurred under Pontius Pilate? When the Apostles’ Creed confesses that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, the Creed does not mean that Jesus only suffered when he was humiliated, flogged and condemned by Pilate, the Roman governor. It is simply saying that the suffering or passion of Jesus occurred under the jurisdiction of Pontius Pilate. The designation is consistent with what is recorded in ancient accounts of martyrdom. We can read there that one martyr suffered under the Roman Caesar, Domitian, and another under Julian or Nero, etc. The Apostles’ Creed aligns itself with such language, in saying, “who suffered under Pontius Pilate.” Jesus had his passion under the jurisdiction of Pontius Pilate.

Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross are thus linked to history. It is confessed as an historical fact that Jesus suffered under the jurisdiction of the governor, Pontius Pilate. Thus, the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus is not just a story. The name Pontius Pilate makes it real and factual. Furthermore, it teaches us that a lawful judge was instrumental in Jesus’ passion, suffering, and death. Jesus was not killed by being stoned to death in a popular uprising. He was not thrust from a steep rock into a deep canyon, as the people of Nazareth wanted to do to him. Moreover, he was not, like John the Baptist, beheaded in the solitude of a prison. Jesus was sentenced to death by crucifixion, during a public trial, and executed by a lawfully-appointed judge. God so governed events, that

Jesus was condemned judicially. Pilate, the judge, affirmed judicially that Jesus was innocent, and declared, “I find no fault in this man”—Luke 23, verse 4. Nevertheless, he sentenced Jesus, though innocent, to be executed by crucifixion.

Jesus suffered as the innocent Lamb of God. In so doing, he caused God’s judgment not to be executed upon his flock, but on himself, the good Shepherd of the flock. He bore the curse of sinners, cursed by the law, in order to be the Savior of the accursed. There is safety in the atoning death of Jesus. Christ has made complete atonement. Therefore, wrath cannot fall on the penitent, trembling sinner, who seeks refuge at the cross. Twice payment God will not demand—first from the suffering Savior, and then again from the sinner who shelters in the righteousness of Christ. That is the blessed Gospel of saving sinners by means of substitution. The debt is paid and the curse has been removed. Romans 8, verse 1 assures us, “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.”

The Apostles’ Creed confesses that Jesus was crucified. The people had cried, “Crucify him, crucify him” (Luke 23:21), and Pontius Pilate yielded the demands of the people and condemned Jesus to be crucified. Crucifixion was one of the most agonizing forms of dying. It was such a horrible death that the Roman government forbade the crucifixion of a Roman citizen. However, Jesus was subjected to the painful, grievous, and dreadful death by crucifixion.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter declared that this event did not happen by chance. He linked the death of Jesus to the eternal counsel and foreknowledge of God, saying, “Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, you have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain” (Acts 2:23). It had been determined in God’s counsel that Jesus would die on the cross. What brought Jesus to the cross was ultimately not Pontius Pilate or the Sanhedrin, but God’s love and purpose. The inhabitants of Nazareth wanted to throw Jesus off the cliff, the angry Jews wanted to stone him, and the Sanhedrin wanted to kill him in secret. Nevertheless, all these attempts to take the life of Jesus failed, for God had purposed that Jesus would die a specific death—he had to die on the cross. He had to die an accursed death. The death on the cross was cursed of God. The law of God speaks, in Deuteronomy 21, verse 23, “He that is hanged is accursed of God.” Therefore, the body of the crucified person had to be taken off the cross, and be buried before nightfall. Otherwise, the curse that rested on the crucified one would now rest on the entire nation. Jesus died a death accursed of God, to remove the curse that rests upon us. The curse of God rests upon us all. He who violates the law of God will thereby subject himself to the curse of the law, for it is written, “Cursed is every one that continues not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them”—Galatians 3, verse 10. However, since Jesus died the accursed death on the cross, the apostle was able to write, “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree”—Galatians 3, verse 13.

Jesus, and him crucified, therefore, now constitutes the heart of the Gospel. The apostle writes, “But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God”—1 Corinthians 1, verse 23. The world’s one and only remedy is the cross.

The Apostles’ Creed states that Jesus died. Why did he die? He never knew, nor committed sin. How can there be death in the absence of sin? Is not death the punishment for sin? Does not the Bible say, “The wages of sin is death”—Romans 6, verse 23? How was it possible that the sinless Jesus died? Jesus did not die for personal sin, but rather, for the sins of his people. He died a surety’s death. In order to be the Savior of his people, he not only had to suffer and be crucified, but he had also to die as the penalty for sin.

God had said to Adam and Eve, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shalt not eat of it: for in the day that you eat thereof you shall surely die”—Genesis 2, verses 16 and 17. The magnificent and luscious Garden of Eden was the home and domain of Adam and Eve. They were permitted to eat from all the trees and enjoy the fruits, except from one tree—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. By way of that tree, God taught them that they were subordinate to him, and that he would determine what is good and evil. Inherent in his Godhead is the fact that he determines what is good and evil. Adam and Eve were obliged to acknowledge the Lord as the God to whom they were subordinate. However, Adam and

Eve disobeyed God. They succumbed to the devil's temptation, and ate from the forbidden tree. The devil had told them that by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would become like God. He said to them, "For God doth know that in the day you eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil"—Genesis 3, verse 5. Man then ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, in order to become as God. However, instead of becoming like God, Adam and Eve were filled with anxiety and fear, and did hide themselves from God. They lost their innocence and inner peace. They knew themselves to have been deceived by the devil.

Death came into the world because of this sin, as stated in Romans 5, verse 12, "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin." However loudly many may claim that death is an essential component of human life, and must be accepted as a natural fact, Scripture contradicts this view. It teaches us that death is God's punishment for sin. That is why Jesus, in order to redeem his people from death, had to die for them, in order "that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man"—Hebrews 2, verse 9. By the death of Jesus, death was put to death, and robbed of its power.

Jesus' death was more than the death of a good person. It was the death of the Son of God, who had assumed our human nature. It was the death of the God-man, the Mediator, Jesus Christ—the Substitute of his people. His death was not a fate that he suffered—his death was a premeditated act. Life was not taken from him—he laid down his life. He said, "I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again"—John 10, verse 18. Jesus' death was so much more than the death of a martyr. Jesus' death was a sacrifice for sin. He, as the Surety and Savior of his chosen people, bore the punishment that had been threatened in response to sin. He gave his soul and his life as a sin offering, so that he would thereby conquer death and merit life on our behalf: "For by one offering he has perfected forever them that are sanctified"—Hebrews 10, verse 14.

The sacrifice of Jesus had such a reconciling power, because it was the sacrifice of a holy and perfect life—a life consecrated to God and the neighbor. This sacrifice of perfect obedience to God's law satisfied the claims of God's justice. God was reconciled by the death of Jesus. In Romans 5, verse 10, the apostle says, "For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son." Jesus' death has robbed death of its power. Death was put to death by his death. Christ's atoning death has taken the sting out of death. Death has lost its sting, when Jesus paid the penalty of our sins, and gave his life as a ransom for sin. His blood bore the curse away. The king of terror has been disarmed. For true believers, death is no more a dreadful foe. Jesus has made death a gateway unto eternal life. Now the apostle can say, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1: 21).

The Apostles' Creed says that Jesus not only died, but also that he was buried. God saw to it that Jesus was buried. The rich Joseph of Arimathaea had made his grave available. Prophecy was thus fulfilled: "And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death"—Isaiah 53, verse 9. Jesus Christ has died and was buried. His body was laid in the grave. The grave is the place of the dead. One's death is conclusively affirmed by being buried. Jesus' burial is the evidence that he had really died. Thus it is not true what is stated in Surah 4, of the Quran, that Jesus did not die, but was taken to heaven by Allah. Jesus indeed died, for he was buried. The Christian church embraces the testimony of the apostle Paul, "that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried . . . according to the scriptures"—1 Corinthians 15, verses 3 and 4. Jesus lived the life of his brethren—of all believers—from the beginning to the end. He lived life in the full sense of the word: he was born, died, and was buried.

Christ's burial is a source of comfort to God's children. It stripped the cold and dark grave of its terror. The grave is now, for the Christian, according to the angel's word on Easter morning, "the place where the Lord lay"—Matthew 28, verse 6. Jesus took the terror from the grave—he filled it with light. The grave has thus lost its darkness. It has been sanctified, and has become a resting place for the bodies of believers, where their bodies will rest until the day of the resurrection. The Lord said to Daniel, "You shall rest, and stand in your lot at the end of the days"—Daniel 12, verse 13.

The Apostle's Creed also confesses that Jesus has "descended into hell." What do we under-

stand this to mean? There are different opinions about this confessional statement. The Roman Catholic Church wants to marshal this confessional statement as proof of their doctrine of purgatory, positing that Jesus descended into purgatory to redeem believers from it. Martin Luther wanted to take it literally, and believed that it meant that Jesus had descended into hell, to proclaim to the devil and the damned his victory over the devil and death. John Calvin judged that “descended into hell” means that Jesus, during his life, suffered what we deserve to suffer in hell. He placed this event as having occurred before Jesus’ death. However, the chronological order in which the Apostles’ Creed lists these events, marks the descent into hell as a fact that occurred after Jesus had been buried. The Creed says, “was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into hell.” This begs the question, What happened to Jesus between Good Friday and Sunday morning? Where did Jesus reside? His soul was in the hands of God the Father, for Jesus, as he was dying, had committed his soul into the secure hands of his Father. In Luke 23, verse 46, we read, he “cried with a loud voice, . . . Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” His body was buried and remained in the grave until the resurrection morning. How then are we to think of the “descent into hell” as having happened after his death? The word “hell,” as used in the Apostles’ Creed, is the Greek word, Hades, which refers to the abode of the dead. Hades is not the place of eternal punishment—Hades is the grave. “The dead” here refers to bodies without their soul. It is the state of separation between body and soul, also referred to as the intermediate state.

On the day of the final resurrection, soul and body will be reunited. Hence the designation of this state as the intermediate state. Jesus spent three days and nights in Hades, that is, in the grave, among the dead. In the grave, the body of Jesus had not seen decomposition. It had been prophesied, regarding the Messiah, that though he would reside in the grave, he would not experience the disintegration of his body. The Messiah says prophetically, in Psalm 16, verse 10, “Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.” Peter quotes this prophecy on the day of Pentecost, and applies it to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and preached to the people that Jesus had returned to life from the Hades—the grave, the realm of the dead, the abode of the dead bodies—and that his body had not decayed during the days between Good Friday and Easter. Peter preached on the day of Pentecost that, in Jesus’ burial, the words of David concerning the Messiah have been fulfilled, “Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.” This is the Biblical meaning of “he descended into hell.”

“Jesus suffered, was crucified, dead and buried; he descended into hell.” These words are the entire Gospel in a nutshell. Jesus engaged in all this, as the Surety and Savior of his church, the elect of God. The personal comfort of this truth is to know that he has done all that for me. The true believer may say, “Jesus did all this in my place. He suffered for me, was crucified for me, died for me, was buried and descended into the grave for me, so that I, the sinner, should have eternal life!” They shall never perish, who have put their trust in him. God’s people may sing:

I sing my Savior’s wondrous death;
he conquered when he fell.
Tis finished! Said his dying breath
And shook the gates of hell.