

## “I believe in Jesus who suffered under Pontius Pilate”

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne July 1, 2007

**Reflection:** Christians believe in one of the most amazing mysteries of all time. Unlike every other religion which sets their gods up high in the mountains, or up in the heavens or even standing as statues on top of pedestals ... Christianity looks to a God who came down and shared our life, who lived and died like one of us. Because God knows what it's like to suffer, we can trust him to help us ...

It's been said you should never trust an unmarried marriage counselor. What would he or she know about the challenges, I mean, joys of being married? Or would you trust someone who's never had children of their own to give you advice about raising yours? I have had a couple of friends over the years who could not drive a car. Early on I learned a valuable lesson never to ask them for directions on how to get anywhere. When it comes to important things in this life, you want to trust someone with hands-on, real-world experience. And that's why I trust Jesus to help me when I suffer. As the Bible tells us: “*Since he himself has gone through suffering and temptation, he is able to help us ...*” when we experience the same things. No matter what suffering I face I know Jesus, who has been there and done that.

### Song: You never let go

*Even though I walk  
Through the valley of the shadow of death  
Your perfect love is casting out fear  
And even when I'm caught  
In the middle of the storms of this life  
I won't turn back, I know you are near  
And I will fear no evil, for my God is with me  
And if my God is with me whom then shall I fear?  
Oh no, you never let go  
Through the calm and through the storm  
Oh no, you never let go in every high and every low  
Oh no, you never let go, Lord, you never let go of me  
And I can see a light  
That is coming for the heart that holds on  
A glorious light beyond all compare  
And there will be an end  
To these troubles but until that day comes  
We'll live to know you here on the earth  
And I will fear no evil, for my God is with me  
And if my God is with me, whom then shall I fear?  
Oh no, you never let go  
Through the calm and through the storm  
Oh no, you never let go in every high and every low  
Oh no, you never let go, Lord, you never let go of me*

**Intro to the Multimedia:** If I asked you, “*How you doing?*” You'd probably say something simple like, “*Fine, thanks.*” In fact, I know this for sure. You see, I've already asked many of you this question this morning. Most of you shook my hand and quickly said, “*Fine.*” But are you? I hope so. There are certainly a great number of things we can celebrate today. But then, if we had the time, and a private place to chat, we could go deeper than just saying “*Fine.*” I know there are parts of your life that are good, and there are parts where you harbor shame, you hang on to grudges and you hold your doubts dearer than your faith. No matter what face you put on it, you have another face that knows the reality of suffering. I've got one too. It's amazing that with all we put up with, we have any sense of humor at all. But who wants to hear all our troubles? So we answer, “*Fine*” even if not everything is. But at least let's be honest about it all. Suffering is real. It's not enough to say that because I believe in Jesus I won't suffer ever again. After all, the Jesus I believe in knew what it meant to suffer too.

### Multimedia: Blinded by Rainbows

music recorded by The Rolling Stones

*Did you ever feel the pain that he felt upon the cross  
Did you ever feel the knife tearing flesh that's oh so soft  
Did you ever touch the night, did you ever count the cost  
Do you hide away the fear, put down paradise as lost  
Yeah you're blinded by rainbows, watching the wind blow  
Blinded by rainbows  
Do you dream at night, do you sleep at night ... I doubt it ...  
Do you ever fear the night, could it be the war is lost  
Do you fear the final hour, do you kneel before the cross  
You're blinded by rainbows and watching the wind blow  
Blinded by rainbows  
Do you dream at night, do you scream at night  
Do you smell of fear, is your conscience clear  
Are you caked in sweat, are your clothes all wet  
Do you see the light, is the end in sight  
See the face of Christ, enter paradise ... I doubt it*

**Intro to the message:** There is nothing in this world like suffering to make you lose your faith in God. It all depends whether you trust in something real to help you get through it all. Where do you turn when trouble comes? Because it always does ... Sometimes suffering seems so real, more real than God. At other times, when someone you love dies suddenly you may question how God could let such a thing happen. Many people, maybe some of you, doubt God when

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you see the horrendous evil in the world, as nation kills nation, as tribes persist in practicing genocide, and the atrocities of mankind mount up with every passing year. It's enough to make anyone wonder ... There is nothing in this world like suffering to make you question your faith in God. Especially when that suffering hits close to home. When it's your diagnosis, or when it's your own child. When the scars of a past relationship won't heal, when the memory of abuse lingers and haunts you. Have you ever felt alone and asked where God is in all of this?

I've found the answers given by helpful Christians do not always help. Years ago I served as a hospital chaplain in Newport News. I met lots of people from lots of different church backgrounds. Some came from churches that taught you might be sick as a form of punishment from God for misbehaving. Others taught that through prayer and a positive attitude you would automatically be healed. Years back we had a couple here at this church who were disappointed with me. They said the reason I had not been miraculously and suddenly healed of my Rheumatoid Arthritis was I simply did not have enough faith. It was all my fault. That was sure helpful. I counseled another fellow who had been told by helpful Christians that he shouldn't worry about suffering. It was just what he needed to build character. That's not what the Bible says, though it does tell us that when we learn to endure suffering that sense of patience brings out something new in our character. But it all depends on how you face the suffering that comes your way though. And that's the point.

It was something I learned long ago just after I became a priest. Back then I was living on my own and working in a church in Norfolk. That's where I met Gina, who is now my wife. At the time though she was someone I knew because she was related to the secretary at the church. Well, shortly after we had met I came down with the flu. Since I didn't know a lot of other people in Norfolk, Gina was kind enough to stop by on her way to work and make sure I had food in the frig, and that I hadn't died, that sort of thing. Gina was my only human contact for a week, as neither my mom in New Hampshire nor the doctor at the local clinic would make house calls. I was so sick that even my cat wouldn't come near me. So I was feeling pretty miserable. That was back before cable TV, cell phones and computers. That was back when if you were

sick you were supposed to sit in bed and read. Well, as I said I felt pretty miserable. I even got a second opinion on that. Gina looked at me one day and said, "*You know you're just pitiful.*" The following week I finally made it back to church. A nice older woman asked me how I was feeling. Of course, I said ... "*Fine.*" But I explained that I'd had the flu for a week and a friend of mine had said I was pitiful. Without losing a beat the lady told me, "*Oh don't worry about that honey, all men are pitiful when they're sick.*"

You see, it all depends on how you face suffering ... It's not good enough to say suffering won't come your way. It will. It's part of life. It's no good to say you're to blame for any suffering you experience. Sometimes you maybe, but not always. And it's not helpful to expect you can force God to heal you if you only have enough faith. God certainly can heal ... he can heal your bodies through both medicine and miracles. I have seen it happen. God can do even more. He can heal your emotional wounds, and he can set you free from your habitual destructive behaviors and your addictions. I've seen that too. I pray each day I'll see more of God's healing in your lives in the years ahead. But of course, for healing to happen you have to accept there are things of which you need to be healed. Suffering happens. It's part of life. It's part of our human nature. What's so amazing is it was also part of his human nature. Because Jesus suffered, I can now face suffering in a whole new way.

Christians state in the creed which sums up their faith that they believe in Jesus, who "*suffered under Pontius Pilate.*" Now the Pilate part is an important footnote. It places Jesus in a specific place and time in history. Pilate was a real person, and so too was Jesus. He wasn't some make-believe character from the distant past. He really lived. We know where and when he was born. We know where he grew up. We know where and when he died, at the time Pilate was governor of Palestine. It's

clear from the history books (other than the Bible) that both Pilate and Jesus were real living people.

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***That first part about how Jesus suffered would seem logical then. I mean, who doesn't suffer if they're really alive? But the importance of the statement goes far beyond the obvious. For it has never been obvious that God, who we have already said was the infinite creator of all there is, should experience the suffering that comes from being human.***

obvious. For it has never been obvious that God, who we have already said was the infinite creator of all there is, should experience the suffering that comes from being human. That's hard to believe simply because it's hard to understand. For a while, God gave up being infinite so he could experience what our life was like. How did he do that? How could Jesus be both human and divine? It's a mystery that kept the early

church leaders arguing for quite some time. It's the thing that separates the Christ we worship as Christians from the view of Jesus in the Koran. Muslims think highly of Jesus but absolutely stop at the cross. They can not believe a prophet would suffer. God keeps the faithful from harm. Certainly God himself would never suffer. Suffering to them is evil. But to Christians the belief Jesus suffered is the key to understanding how we can have hope in suffering.

Sure it's a mystery. It's like some of the other mysteries of life. I have a sixth grader at home. Maybe you remember those days. What was it you hated most about elementary math classes? I'll bet it was fractions. No matter how much it was explained to you it was hard to remember numerators and denominators and least common factors and well, that's why to this day, I've been told, 5 out of 4 people still have trouble with fractions ... Yup, some things are just too hard to understand fully. But then, I don't have to understand something to deal with it. Knowing why I have Rheumatoid Arthritis might be interesting, but it wouldn't help me cope with the symptoms any better. For those of you with cancer, would knowing the cause be anything more than ... mildly interesting? What really matters to you is not the why, but the how ... That's the same for each of you when you face trouble. You need to know how: how to beat it, how to have hope, how to live. You want to know how you can make sense out of the things that happen in life. The big question each of us faces is this: "How can I face suffering and emerge without feeling defeated?" Here's where the big question comes in ... What difference does this make in my daily life?

As a Christian who knows Christ has suffered, I feel I have an answer to the "how." I know there is nothing in the world like suffering to make you doubt in God. But I also know this: There is nothing in the world more than suffering that can help you trust in God more. There is nothing in the world more than suffering that can help you trust in God more. You can trust a God who has experienced suffering for himself. What's great about this is God's not only been there and done that in the past, he's still here with you to help you cope today. God may not make all your suffering go away, he promises he'll never go away.

So, what difference does this make to me? I've learned that what makes you fine is not that everything is perfect, but that you know no matter what, God will be with you. God will be with me, no matter what I have to go through in this life. He will be there beside me. I'm not happy with the thought of suffering. I sometimes feel there's a lot of grieving in life, in growing up and going on. You have to learn how to grieve for your losses. I'm still learning how. Sometimes I'm better at it than others. But at least there is this, and it's not a small thing, it's the whole ball game. No matter what I face, I will not have to face it alone. No matter how pitiful I become, I know God will be with me. I won't have to go through any of life's suffering by myself. Neither will you. So no matter what happens, you'll be able to get through it because God's already been through it and knows the way. As one of the most famous parts of the Bible tells us: "*There is no ... trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying*

*threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture ... there is nothing that can faze us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.*" [Romans 8:35, 37-39 The Message]

I can face suffering differently because I believe Jesus suffered. I can live differently because of what God has done, as the Bible says, "*because of how Jesus has embraced me.*" That's something else I learned long ago. It was back when my son, now inches taller than me, was only 4. I was serving in a church in Massachusetts. During one year I buried three infants. The death of a child is always a hard thing. It's one of those times when suffering makes people question whether God is truly loving or powerful or good. Parents ask why God would let any infant die. One of the children, baby Connor, died in his sleep. He was 18 months old so technically they did not call it Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, but that's probably what it was. Of course, knowing exactly why he died did not give help or hope to his mother. She was a single mother with a other young kids. She was trying her best. Now this had happened. She wondered how she would ever be able to go on with her life. I met her at the Emergency Room that morning. She had just been given the bad news. We sat together next to Connor. She did not want to leave him. She held him for a long time. Finally the nurses came in for their third trip and said they needed to have the mother leave. She didn't know what to do. How could she leave her baby behind? I told her to hand Connor to me. I'd hold him for her as she left. I don't know why I said that. It was a gruesome task. I kept thinking about my own son, not that much older than Connor and how devastating it would be if I were here holding his lifeless body. Everything about this situation made me want to hand Connor over to the nurses and leave as soon as I could. But I hesitated for a moment. It was one of the most important things I've ever done in my ministry. Do you know why? I didn't know why at the time ... but if I had laid baby Connor down a moment earlier I would have messed everything up. You see, Connor's mom came back into the ER for a final "Goodbye" and saw me sitting with him in my arms, in the rocking chair the nurses had brought in for her to use hours before. It was sheer dumb luck on my part, or God's timing, but once she saw he was still in my arms she turned and left. She said later that made all the difference to her. She left the hospital at peace. She knew Connor was in God's arms.

In God's arms ... As I said, God may not make all your suffering go away, he simply promised he'd never go away. You can face suffering differently now because of how Jesus has embraced you. Suffering doesn't have to make you lose your faith. It can, if you forget God knows what you're going through. But suffering doesn't have to faze you. It can't separate you from God's embrace, not if you put your trust in the God who knows what it's like to suffer. But that's not all ... Christians also believe, as we say later in the Creed, that a day is coming when there will be life everlasting, where there will no longer be any pain or suffering, no crying, no dying, because

those things simply can not happen in God's presence. Right now you don't live there. Not fully. You're not home yet. In the mean time we know suffering will be real. It will come to us all. So will God. For just as real is God's presence here and now, and you can trust him to help you. You are in God's embrace.

## **Solo: Not Home Yet**

music recorded by Stephen Curtis Chapman

To all the travelers, pilgrims longing for a home  
From one who walks with you on this journey called life's  
road

It is a long and winding road from one who's seen the view  
And dream of staying on the mountains high and one who's  
cried like you

Wanting so much just to lay down and die

I offer this, we must remember this

We are not home yet, we are not home yet

Keep on looking ahead, let your heart not forget

We are not home yet, not home yet

So close your eyes with me and hear the Father saying,  
"welcome home"

Let us find the strength in all his promises to carry on  
He said, "I go prepare a place for you" so let us not forget

We are not home yet, we are not home yet

Keep on looking ahead, let your heart not forget

We are not home yet, we are not home yet

I know there'll be a moment, I know there'll be a place  
Where we will see our Saviour and fall in his embrace

So let us not grow weary or too content to stay

'Cause we are not home yet, we are not home yet