

**JESUS SUFFERED ALL HIS LIFE**  
**Heidelberg Catechism LD 15 Q37**

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In one of our more sober moments we could summarize human life as being born, suffering life, and dying. As someone once put it 'It's about being hatched, matched and dispatched.' If we look at the Apostle's Creed, its summary of the life of Jesus is not much different. *"I believe...in Jesus Christ ...who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried..."* The key words there are *'born...suffered...crucified...dead and buried'*. Now, on their own, there is nothing about these words concerning Jesus that is distinctive or significant. For as we said all humans are born, suffer and die. Even being crucified is not unique to Jesus. There were literally thousands of men who were crucified in Jesus' time. And over the centuries hundreds of thousands have suffered even greater agonies than crucifixion will all sorts of gruesome tortures. Even Old Testament believers suffered terribly. The letter to the Hebrews (11:35-38) describes those *"...who were tortured, ...Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated...they wondered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground."*

And yet there is a great significance in each of the words *'suffered...crucified... died'* because of who we are talking about. We are talking about *"Jesus Christ, God's only begotten son, our Lord..."* That is what gives our creedal statement its impact. God was born a man, an ordinary human being. God, as human as us, *'suffered... was crucified, dead and buried.'* The problem with growing up in the faith is that this fact no longer staggers us. We tend to take it for granted. But sometimes a bit of doubt or disbelief is truer to the mark. God, yet human, suffered and died! Here is something else to understand and grasp. It is also only because the subject of these words is *'the son of God'* that we can accept the explanation to Question 37. It is only as *'the Son of God'* that Jesus could sustain *"...the anger of God against the sin of the whole human race"*. And only as God yet human that Jesus could make the suffering an act of perfect obedience to *"...gain for us God's grace..."*

Now while we are in the process of looking at the context you notice that the confession in Q37 actually breaks with the setting of the Apostle's Creed. The creed

says in one clause "...suffered under Pontius Pilate." The reference to Pilate sets the date for Christ's suffering. But it is also an indication that the 'suffering' the Apostle's Creed refers to is the torment of Jesus just prior to and with his crucifixion. The intent of the Apostle's Creed was not to split the words 'suffered' and 'under Pontius Pilate'. But the Catechism does separate this phrase. So, looking at the word 'suffered', on its own, it can emphasize that Jesus actually suffered 'during his whole life on earth'. But why do that? What really is the issue? We might react here and say, as before, 'Yes, but what is so significant about saying Jesus suffered his whole life?' Many people suffer their whole lives. Everywhere we look in this world we see human suffering: swollen bellies aching for food, homeless refugees, pain racked bodies experiencing the ravages of cancer, grieving families mourning the loss of loved ones, healthy limbs turned useless through accident or stroke, worn out knees and hips, lonely people crying out for friendship and acceptance, relationships broken beyond repair, human minds that lose the grasp of reality, parents blaming themselves for the actions of their wayward sons and daughters, alcohol and drug addicts struggling to be freed of the chemical dependency. Hugh MacKay writes of our communities 'We are more socially fragmented, more anxious, more depressed, more overweight, more medicated, deeper in debt and increasingly addicted- whether to our digital devices, drugs, pornography or stuff'. The suffering that many people go through, makes Jesus' life look relatively pleasant. Think of this, the New Testament nowhere describes Jesus as ever being sick or having an accident. And what about ourselves? We have all had our hard times. We have lost loved ones. We have struggled with illnesses and character issues. So, what is the significance about Jesus suffering 'his whole life on earth'?

Well, remember what we said earlier. Who is the confession talking about here? It is 'Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. As God, as God become human, Jesus' experience of suffering was so much deeper than ours. In fact, his suffering was unique. Jesus was not just a 'fellow sufferer' or even the 'greatest of sufferers'. His suffering was of a kind that no one else can experience. For Jesus is the 'Son of God'. He is the 'holy one among us'. He is totally pure, having no sin at all. Therefore sin, and its devastating effects stand out so much more strongly for him. Let me put it like this. Can you see the capital letter 'T' on this black page? Barely, if at all. What about now on this white page? Now it can be seen very clearly. Our ability to see our own sinfulness for what it really is, is like the black page. Sin so saturates our lives we don't really see it. Unless it is horrendous like murder or child abuse. But Jesus is pure and holy. The contrast for him is stark, like a black letter on a white page. He is the total opposite to sin. Where we are used to it and live with sin, and have even normalized it, his whole being is opposed to sin. Because he was without sin, Jesus felt everything much more deeply than we will ever be able to feel them. His wounds were deeper, his sorrows heavier, his

disappointments greater, his grief more profound. There is nothing you go through or struggle with that Jesus does not understand way better than you can even begin to think.

You notice how our confession emphasizes that Jesus suffered 'in body and soul'. So, his suffering was not just a physical thing. It was much deeper. Jesus was perfect. His love for God was total. For he is God, God's son. Therefore, to live in a world that has rebelled against God was also a constant affront to Jesus. All around him Jesus saw the rejection of his Father. He saw the revolt against the one he loves. Never once did Jesus fail God or reject him. Never was God angry with Jesus. His suffering was never due to his own sin. He was perfect. So often what we suffer is the consequence of our own sin. At the very least what we suffer is the result of the rebellion of humanity against its maker. We all live under the curse. We are part of that rebellion. And we are egocentric. We usually complain about what happens to us. We do not often feel the hurt of others. And we seldom think of the pain that God suffers. Do you see God as someone who suffers? Or do you think he is so almighty he is above the fray, above everything? What God suffers is the pain he feels as he looks at a world that rejects and ruins what he created. But Jesus, as opposed to us, was sinless. His suffering was not due to his failings. He did not have a sinful nature that blinded and blunted his understanding of the effects of sin. He was God. And he felt all the pain that God felt. He felt the rejection and the unbelief; the 'couldn't care less' attitudes. And he knew the pain others felt. He felt the hurt and the hate in all around him as he saw into their hearts. Here was the Son of God, as a human being, stepping into a world that was destroying itself because of its rebellion against his Father. Here was God stepping under his own curse on creation. A curse given because of the disobedience to the laws of God. Remember the curse put on Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:17 *"The day you eat of the tree you will surely die"*.)

We all know the shortest verse in the Bible (John 11:35) *"Jesus wept"*. He wept at Lazarus' grave. The verses before that say (John 11:33) *"When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled."* The Greek word means 'to snort, to be moved with anger, to be filled with indignation'. Jesus was not just moved to tears because a friend died. He knew in a few moments he would bring him back to life. No, here was the result of sin. Here was the curse of human rebellion in all its ugliness and grief. As Paul wrote (Romans 6:23) *"The wages of sin is death"*. This is not how it was meant to be. Jesus was deeply agitated because this is how sin affected everything, how it wrecked everything. Even the closest of relationships here on earth are broken, torn apart because of sin.

But Christ's suffering was not only unique in the fact that he was God, seeing sin for what it really was. Even more, what Jesus suffered was the "...*anger of God against the whole human race.*" So not just feeling God's pain. But suffering God's awesome anger. This was '...especially at the end' as we well know with his suffering 'under Pilate' and his crucifixion. But also, during his whole life he suffered the anger of God. As God himself, Jesus knew better than anyone the anger of God for the for the world's rebellion. That's why he was on earth as one of the human race. His purpose was to pay the price for that rebellion. And all the time, as he experienced the sin of the world, he felt within himself his own Godly anger. And so, all the time, constantly, Jesus was reminded of his mission, to bear the 'anger of God against the whole human race.' God was never angry with Jesus personally. But God expressed his anger at Jesus because he had taken on the status of the sinful human being. In theology we make the distinction between a person's status or condition. For example, when a migrant comes to live in Australia. When that migrant is naturalized their status is changed. They become an Australian citizen, although their condition remains the same. They still think and act in many ways like a Dutchman or Chinese etc. Jesus in his own being, his condition, is that he is perfectly obedient to God. But his status is that he is seen as a rebellious human being. He is seen as a sinner who represents 'the whole human race', because all humanity has and is still rebelling. And on Jesus God would express his anger for the sin and rejection by humanity. That anger was finally expressed by God's total and utter rejection of Jesus on the cross, when he suffered hell itself.

All of this Jesus, as God himself, knew full well. He was to suffer the ejection of God. He who was God, who loved the Father perfectly, who felt deeply within himself the hurt and anger of God for sin, he was to suffer it. As our confession writes, it was "...*especially at the end...*" that Jesus "...*sustained the anger of God*". But the shadow of the cross hung over all his life. Christ was constantly aware of where he was going. He explained repeatedly to his disciples that he must suffer and die. The gospels tell us that Jesus 'set his face toward Jerusalem'. Things did not just happen to him. He made them happen. The Catechism says Jesus 'sustained...the anger of God'. In other words, he deliberately stepped into his suffering. He was obedient. So, no matter his status as a sinner, Jesus was true to his condition as perfect. He was fully obedient to God. Just as sin is an act of disobedience, Christ's suffering for sin was an act of obedience. His suffering was not passive. It was not something that 'unfortunately' happened to him. It was a deliberate act. That is the paradox of the cross. At the moment of his deepest and most perfect obedience Jesus suffered the curse of the disobedient and the damned. As the Father rejected Jesus in hell, Jesus still faithfully hung onto God. As he said, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me*".

Yes, why? *"This he did in order that by his suffering as the only atoning sacrifice, he might set us free, body and soul, from the eternal condemnation, and gain for us God's grace, righteousness and eternal life."* The wonder of this is often lost because the anger of God is not something our culture is all that aware of. It is seen as old-fashioned language used to scare people. It's not thought of because we have grown accustomed to sin. It seldom shocks us, unless we see extreme things like brutality and torture. It's often assumed that God overlooks sin. That is, if it is accepted there is a God. It's easier to believe God forgives sin than that he punishes it. I mean, we get away with so much, don't we? But the Bible teaches that punishment is the natural consequence of rejecting God. And that forgiveness is a miracle, a divine surprise. Forgiveness is by grace alone. But it cost Jesus enormously. At this time of Lent we will focus on what Jesus went through. It might shock us out of the complacency of our culture. It may have us thinking of Lent, not just as fasting from some TV or some certain indulgences but reviewing our attitudes and priorities and lifestyle. The more we understand what Jesus went through for us the more we realize what we owe him. Our response must surely be like that of Bernard of Clairvaux who wrote over 800 years ago,

'What language shall I borrow, to thank thee dearest friend.  
For this thy dying sorrow, thy pity without end?  
O make me thine forever, and should I fainting be, Lord.  
Let me never, never, outlive my love to thee.'