

Meditating on Christ's Passion

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Prophet Isaiah speaks as if he had walked side-by-side with Jesus all His life – from the time that He grew up before him like a young plant – to the time when He was oppressed and afflicted, and like a lamb that is led to the slaughter.

This is no cute and cuddly lamb that Isaiah sees. His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance – that all who seem Him are astonished at the sight. Jesus is considered to be “stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.”

The Passion of Christ, from His birth to His death – appears to be a horrible, gory, disastrous injustice. But it is, in fact, the Lord's will – and a revealing of the “arm of the Lord” – a showing forth of the power and strength of the Lord God Almighty.

Isaiah writes with such clarity – hundreds of years before Christ was even born. But how are we, who stand on this side of the Lord's Passion – we who have the benefit of hearing Isaiah's prophecy and St. John's account --- how are we to view the suffering and death of our Lord?

Having heard the passion accounts all our lives, its easy to paint a picture for ourselves that smooths out the roughness – sanitizes the earthiness – and applies a certain patina. Stricken, smitten and afflicted rolls off the tongue with poetic ease.

Without actually standing at the foot of the cross, it's impossible to grasp the depth of Christ's suffering. Try as we might – the suffering of the Son of God at the hands of men – is greater than we can imagine.

As we once again focus our attention on the Passion of Christ – hearing what God has to say – His words revealing His truths – we must be careful that our meditation of His suffering and death paints the picture that God wants us to see.

Some people meditate on Christ's Passion by venting their anger at Pontius Pilate, or the Roman soldiers, or the Jews. They derive a certain satisfaction by fixing blame – by chastising the evil deeds of these people. But that is a meditation on the wickedness of others – not on the sufferings of Christ.

Some meditate on the Passion in such a way that they turn their meditation into a good work, or a good-luck charm, that will ward off all suffering. But that's using Christ's suffering to escape our own suffering.

Others fill their meditation with loud weeping and wailing for Jesus – feeling great pity for this innocent man. But they are like the women who followed Jesus, to whom Jesus said: “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children.”

To meditate upon Christ's Passion aright – first, you must see it as God's wrath, and the penalty for sin. And if this is what Jesus, the innocent Son of God endures – what does that mean for you, the rebellious sinner?

In your meditation, you must understand that you are the one who is torturing Christ – that it is your sin which brings this wrath and punishment upon Jesus. The spitting and mocking of God are yours. The crown of thorns beaten into His head are the result of your own evil thoughts. It is your hands that hold the spikes, and strike with the hammer – to crucify Jesus.

Martin Luther said that “the main benefit of Christ's passion is that man sees into his own true self and that he be terrified and crushed by this ... Here the passion of Christ performs its natural and noble work, strangling the old Adam and banishing all joy, delight, and confidence which man could derive from other creatures, even as Christ was forsaken by all, even God.”

Confessing one's responsibility for Christ's suffering and death – and forsaking all hope of merit or worthiness in yourself – is only part of a proper meditation upon Christ's Passion.

Most importantly you must understand that all of this was “for you.” That He has born your griefs and carried your sorrows – that He was wounded for your transgressions, crushed for your iniquities – suffered the chastisement that brought you peace – and with His stripes you are healed.

Having been set free from a terror-stricken heart and a despairing conscience – Luther says that now you view Christ’s Passion differently.

“Now, if pain or sickness afflicts you, consider how paltry this is in comparison with the thorny crown and the nails of Christ. If you are obliged to do or refrain from doing things against your wishes, ponder how Christ was bound and captured and led hither and yon. If you are beset by pride, see how your Lord was mocked and ridiculed along with criminals. If unchastity and lust assail you, remember how ruthlessly Christ’s tender flesh was scourged, pierced, and beaten. If hatred, envy, and vindictiveness beset you, recall that Christ, who indeed had more reason to avenge himself, interceded with tears and cries for you and for all his enemies. If sadness or any adversity, physical or spiritual, distresses you, strengthen your heart and say, “Well, why should I not be willing to bear a little grief, when agonies and fears caused my Lord to sweat blood in the Garden of Gethsemane? He who lies abed while his master struggles in the throes of death is indeed a slothful and disgraceful servant.”

When your conscience assails you, and the reality of your sin burdens you – behold not just what your eyes see – but hear what the Lord promises. I have sent my Son “for you” – and He has carried your sorrows, your afflictions, your sin to the cross.

This, Luther calls, pouring your sin back on Jesus so that your conscience might be set free. Do not take back your sin as if it belongs to you – as if Jesus has not paid the debt in full. “It is finished.” You are forgiven. You are free. Go in peace.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.