

“The Passion Begins”

The Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ is our focus this Lenten season – but just what is this “passion”? We hear the word “passion” and we think in terms of emotions, a strong feeling or desire – like what you’ll hear on Sunday when the Gospel reading refers to Jesus’ “zeal” for God’s house. That is not what is meant here by “passion.” The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ is His “suffering.”

Now, when we think of His suffering, we typically fast-forward to the whipping and the crown of thorns, the nail-pierced hands and the cross. Actually, one could say that His suffering begins with His incarnation – when He comes in the flesh to suffer all that mankind suffers.

He is squeezed through the birth canal, fasts in the wilderness, is mocked and rejected by His own. Certainly, He has endured much suffering already, but when we speak of The Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ – it begins here, as one church father would say, with “His inner (spiritual) agony” in Gethsemane. It begins with His return to a garden.

It was the custom of Jesus during Passover week to teach in the temple during the day, “but at night He went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet” (Lk. 21:37). On the night in which He was betrayed, again, He went out of Jerusalem and entered into a garden, called Gethsemane – and there He prayed.

In the Garden of Eden, Adam lived in communion with God – so now, Jesus, the Second Adam – is also in a garden, with His Father, praying to Him. That the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ begins in a garden – reminds us that Jesus, the Second Adam, has come to do what the first Adam did not (and could not) do. All the suffering that Adam’s sin brought into the world – Jesus will endure in His Passion.

The earthly ministry of Jesus begins at His baptism, as He steps into the sin-soaked waters of the Jordan – taking the sin of the world as His very own – and beginning His trek full of suffering to the cross. And as the voice from heaven reveals – the Father is well pleased with His Son – that He should bear the sin of the world.

Now, on the night in which He is handed over, Jesus went out of Jerusalem and crossed the Kidron Valley. One of the church fathers says, regarding this deep valley, that “the idolatrous god Moloch [at one time] stood there, an image made from brass. [The idolatrous worshippers] made it red hot and placed their children in its arms, intending it to be a pleasing sacrifice to such a god.”

“Through this valley flows the brook Kidron, in which [at this time] flowed all the filth from the city, especially also the water from the temple. (The water [of the brook] was piped through the temple, and together with it the blood of the sacrifices was washed away.) Therefore it was an unclean [polluted] brook, and on account of the fat laden black dirt, it was called the black brook.” (John Gerhard, 58)

All the sin from Adam – all the sin of the whole world – cannot be redeemed by a false god like Moloch. All the blood of the sacrifices in the Temple had no power in itself to atone for sin – but only pointed faith forward to the blood that would be shed by this One crossing over the Kidron Valley – a reminder that this One carries all sin in His flesh.

And now He comes to the Mount of Olives – where olives were grown and pressed, squeezed until the oil flowed out of them. Bearing the sin of the world, He says, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death.” In great agony He prays to the Father. As Adam toiled by the sweat of his brow because of the curse of sin – so now Jesus’ sweat falls to the ground like great drops of blood, for He has become the curse for us.

In the wilderness the devil tempted Jesus – and having failed – he waited until “an opportune time.” This is an opportune time. Jesus is burdened, pressed down by the sin of the world. He knows the Father’s plan of salvation. He knows what sin deserves and He knows the wrath of God.

Depending on the medicine, your children react violently when they see you approach with the little cup of medicine. If you are 50+ years of age, you don't look forward to drinking that stuff to prep for a colonoscopy. Well, Jesus knows what's in the cup that He must drink – He's been in the noxious waters of the Jordan, He's crossed the putrid black brook – He knows the cup of God's wrath being poured out.

Sometimes we approach The Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, thinking – He's true God – so this isn't such a big deal for Him. Folks, He is also true man. This is not easy for Jesus. The unrepentant one thinks that his sin is insignificant. As Jesus faces what lies ahead for Him because of man's sin – He shudders. He knows better.

We experience suffering in our lives as well – sometimes as the result of our own sin, sometimes as the result of another's sin against us, and sometimes as a result of sin in the world. This is but a glimpse of the suffering that Jesus endures. He truly suffers hell for us – in our place – as He endures all of God's wrath for all sin.

When Adam was tempted in the Garden of Eden, it was his will set against the Father's will. God says "do not eat" – and the devil says that no harm will come to you, that you will "be like God" – and so when Eve handed it to him, and he ate.

Now the Second Adam, God-in-the-flesh-Jesus, is also faced with the Father's will – and it is once again a life or death situation. He knows death is what lies ahead for Him – and He knows how that death will take place. Is there another way? Is there a way to be delivered from this death?

"Not what I will, but what you will." "Thy will be done." Jesus knows the Father's will is that He should suffer and die – so that you may not suffer and die eternally. So, Jesus does what Adam did not do, He lives by faith. He willingly gives Himself into the hands of His captors and is taken away. It's a life and death situation – His death, for your life.

Like the disciples, we follow Jesus across the Kidron Valley and into the garden. Like Peter, James and John, we hear the loud cries of Jesus in agony as He prays to the Father. Like them, we are told to watch and pray with Jesus so that we do not enter into temptation. Like them, our spirit is indeed willing, but our flesh is weak. Like them, we proudly assert that we will not deny Him, but when push comes to shove, we scatter like sheep.

Our sin only adds to His burden, His Passion. And yet, He leads us through His Passion so that we might see that all this He has done for us. He alone prays that the Father's will be done, and living by faith, does it. He alone is bound and led away for sacrifice – because His death alone redeems the world's sin.

In this Season of Lent, let us pray that we will not fall into temptation – let us pray that not our will, but the Father's will be done – and let us not scatter, but be gathered to Jesus – that His suffering may ease our own – His blood release us from our bondage – and His death, bring forth abundant life for all His disciples. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.