

## The Passion of Our Lord Matthew 26-27

We are entering the most holy of weeks in the church and calendar year... Holy Week. Today is known as either Palm Sunday or the Sunday of the Passion. I believe historically the focus of this Sunday has been the Passion of our Lord and not necessarily the event of Jesus entering Jerusalem. This makes sense, after all, because the church doesn't try to recreate the events of Holy Week. It's a done deal. We know the end of the story. But traditionally, Christians have meditated on the Passion of our Lord during Holy Week. Today, we read St. Matthew's account of the Passion. On Holy Tuesday, St. Mark's account of the Passion is traditionally read. On Holy Wednesday, St. Luke's account of the Passion is traditionally read. And on Good Friday, we read St. John's account of the Passion. If the church is big enough, there are usually services every day of Holy Week. That's not been our practice and I don't plan to change that. However, I would encourage you to read through all four accounts of the Passion this week. We just did St. Matthew's account. We'll do St. John's account during the Good Friday Tenebrae service. You can read the other two this week before Good Friday.

Why do we read the passions?

After all, they are long and uncomfortable to read. We're not used to reading such long stretches of Scripture in one sitting. Which is a shame, but that's the world we all live in. Furthermore, the subject itself is incredibly uncomfortable. The death of Jesus on behalf of the world is ugly because our sin is ugly. Isaiah foretells about Christ that "He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him." (Is 53:2b) The picture of Christ on the cross is an ugly picture. But, at the same time, it is beautiful because of what He was doing there: "He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed." (Is 53:5) Our healing is what makes something so ugly so beautiful. We know the end of the story. Christ crushes the head of the devil and breaks our bondage to sin, death, and the devil. That's why the passion accounts in the four Gospels are the pinnacle of Scripture. We should know these passion accounts better than we know anything else in all of Scripture.

That's where Christ the Bridegroom paid the price to redeem His bride, the church. That's where you see the love of God for you.

We don't read, mark, learn, and take the passion accounts to heart to feel sorry for Jesus. His suffering is at an end. If you want to say that He's still long-suffering over His stiff-necked Christians, I'll grant you that. But His Passion is complete. The preacher in Hebrews says, "Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross [and] despised the shame." (Heb 12:2) The joy of Jesus is the joy of the bridegroom winning the hand of His bride. When we see someone struggle against adversity, pain, and even death to claim a prize, we rejoice with them when they win that prize. How much more should we rejoice when we hear again of our Savior's struggle against sin, death, and the devil?

We read and meditate upon the Passions to remember our part in it. Sadly, the air we breathe and the water we drink is full of the modern attitude that we're smart and ancient people in the time of Jesus were stupid. We aren't impervious to its influence. Many times, we fall into the trap of thinking we're so much stronger and smarter than Judas or Peter or the Pharisees or the Scribes. There's no way we would have betrayed or denied or accused or mocked our Lord. Not really. We think we love Jesus so much that there's no way we put Him on the cross. We easily forget how desperately wicked our old Adam is. It is good to meditate upon the Passion and to put yourself into it.

In your flesh, you may be like the apostles who are indignant at Mary for anointing Jesus's feet and hair with expensive ointment. It seemed like such extreme extravagance. Do you ever get indignant with how much a pastor is paid? Do you ever get irritated with what the church spends on such things like paraments and other decorative things? Do you ever get frustrated that the church isn't doing enough for the local community? Our sin sent Jesus to the cross.

In your flesh, you may be like Judas Iscariot who betrayed our Lord. Have you ever fallen away from the faith? Have you tasted the sweetness of the Gospel and insisted on the bitterness of works righteousness? Our sin sent Jesus to the cross.

In your flesh, you may be like Peter. Peter is bold and foolish and strong and weak all at the same time. He boldly proclaims that he will stick with Jesus even unto death and yet denies knowing the Lord. He boasts of his strength all the time and yet cannot even stay awake one hour with the Lord. Have you ever kept quiet so that others won't know you're one of those weak, foolish Christians? Have you ever failed in something you vowed to do for the Lord? Our sin sent Jesus to the cross.

In your flesh, you may be like Caeaphas or Pilate throwing wild and baseless accusations at Jesus. Caeaphas was looking for any excuse to murder Jesus. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent, but condemned Him anyway. Have you ever been angry at God for your lot in life? Have you ever worried because things seem out of control? You basically accuse God of not doing His job. Our sin sent Jesus to the cross.

In your flesh, you may be a false witness to Christ. The false witness reported Jesus' words, but they were mis-reported and misused. You may have, at times, confessed a works-righteous faith in Christ. You may have, at times, confessed a type of prosperity gospel. There's a fine line between expressing thanksgiving for blessings from God and equating those blessings with the idea that God is pleased with you. When God answers prayer with a "No," you're still His dear child. I'm sure you've seen those memes declaring God is good when someone is healed. Well, God is still good when He doesn't heal. Our sin sent Jesus to the cross.

In your flesh, you may be like the crowd shouting "Crucify Him" and "His blood be on us and our children." Or you may be like the people passing by mocking Jesus. Do you ever sin assuming you're forgiven? Do you despise the righteous demands of God wanting to live your life "your" way? Our sin sent Jesus to the cross.

You are certainly Barabbas. You may not have spent time in jail like Barabbas but in the heavenly court, you are just as guilty as Barabbas. Yet God sets you free and replaces you with His only begotten Son to take the punishment you so richly deserve. Your sin put Jesus on the cross and Jesus gladly takes punishment from God His Father in your place.

As Isaiah says, “He poured out His soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.” (53:12) Jesus saves transgressors also known as sinners. Jesus saves sinners. If you aren’t counted among the sinners, you cannot be counted among the redeemed. As Jesus says, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Mk 2:17) You are certainly Barabbas.

You are also certainly Simon of Cyrene. You will bear crosses in your life. Simon bore the physical cross of Christ. God puts crosses on you in this life to conform you to the image of Christ. We don’t seek out suffering, but we also know that growth only comes through suffering. We don’t shy away from suffering either. We are certainly Simon of Cyrene.

God willing, you are also the Centurion. You see the work of Christ through your ears and are filled with awe. How can Jesus do all this to redeem me? How can Jesus so thoroughly forgive His enemies? How can Jesus so thoroughly pay for the sins of those who despise Him, spit upon Him, mock Him, and crucify Him? How can Jesus love those who do not love Him? How can Jesus bear the weight of the world’s sin on His shoulders? “Truly [Jesus is] the Son of God!” (Mt 27:54)

Take some time this week to meditate upon the passion of our Lord. See how thoroughly Jesus loves you! See the gravitas of your sin that drove Jesus to the cross. And then throw your sins upon Jesus on the cross so that you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that they are paid for. In this is true joy, “not that we have loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” (1 Jn 4:10) Amen!