

How to Meditate on the Passion of Christ

By Martin Luther

Wrong Ways to Meditate on Christ's Passion

Some people meditate on the Passion of Christ and become angry at the Jews. They sing and go on and on about Judas too. [1] They are just doing what they always do. They love to complain about other people. They spend all their time condemning their enemies. I guess this is a meditation of sorts, but not a meditation on the sufferings of Christ. It is just a meditation on the wickedness of the Jews and Judas.

Other people who like to talk about the benefit of meditating on Christ's Passion miss the point. Something Albertus [2] said can be very misleading. He said that thinking about the Passion of Christ is better than fasting a whole year or praying through the Psalms every day. Some people blindly follow him, take his comment literally, and then act contrary to Christ's passion. They are just looking out for their own interests, trying to get out of doing other things. They superstitiously decorate themselves with pictures and booklets, letters and crucifixes. Some of them even go so far as to imagine that by doing these things they are protecting themselves against drowning, burning, the sword, and all sorts of other dangers. [3] They try to use the sufferings of Christ to prevent any suffering from coming into their life, which is of course entirely contrary to how life really is.

Then there are the people who like to sympathize emotionally with Christ. They weep and wail over Him because He was so innocent. They are like the women who followed Christ from Jerusalem. He rebuked them! He told them that they should weep for themselves and their children. They run headlong into the Passion season thinking they are receiving great benefit by pondering deeply on things like how Jesus left Bethany, or the pains and sorrows suffered by the Virgin Mary. [4] They meditate on these things for hours and hours on end. But they never get any farther. Somehow they don't reflect on Christ's actual suffering and death. God only knows if they are doing this more to sleep than to watch and wait with Christ. [5]

People like this include fanatics who try to teach people that they receive a great blessing from simply attending the celebration of the Lord's Supper, standing there and watching it being performed. They try to tell people that simply showing up and watching

a Mass, automatically works blessings, by the very act of doing it. They would lead people to believe that the Lord's Supper has nothing to do with faith in the promise of the Lord's Supper, or being worthy to receive the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper was not instituted for its own sake, as if simply doing it was the point. It was given for the purpose of meditating on the Passion of Christ. If we don't do this, we are turning the Lord's Supper into a human work. We are making it a useless thing that we do, no matter how good it may be in and of itself. What use is it to you that God is God, if He is not God *for you*? What use is eating and drinking if they are not beneficial *for you*? We should be afraid of thinking that we will become better simply because we celebrate the Lord's Supper a lot, while all the while failing to receive its true benefit.

The Right Way to Think About Christ's Passion

When we meditate on the Passion of Christ the right way, we see Christ and are terrified at the sight. Our conscience sinks in despair. This feeling of terror needs to happen so that we fully realize how great the wrath of God is against sin and sinners. We understand this when we see how God sets sinners free only because His dearly beloved Son -- His only Son -- paid such a costly ransom for us, as Isaiah 53:8 says, "He was stricken for the transgressions of my people."

What happens to us when we see the dear Child of God struck down like this? We realize how inexpressible, even unbearable, is the Son's total commitment to saving sinners. How else can we feel when we realize that a person so great as Christ went out to meet this fate, suffering and dying for sinners? If you truly and deeply reflect on the fact that God's Son, the eternal Wisdom of God, suffers, you will be filled with terror. The more you reflect on it the deeper you will feel this way.

You should deeply believe, and never doubt, that in fact *you* are the one who killed Christ. *Your* sins did this to Him. St. Peter struck terror in the hearts of the Jews when he said in Acts 2:36-27: "You crucified Him!" Three thousand people were filled with terror. Trembling in fear they cried out to the Apostles, "Dear brothers, what should we do?" Therefore, when you look at the nails being driven through His hands, firmly believe that it is *your* work. Do you see His crown of thorns? Those thorns are *your* wicked thoughts.

Look! When one thorn pierces Christ, you need to know that more than a thousand should pierce you. They should pierce you for all eternity even more painfully than they ever pierced Christ. When you see nails driven through the hands and feet of Christ, know that you should be suffering this for all eternity, with even more painful nails. Everyone who looks on Christ's sufferings and forgets about them, thinking they are of no worth, will suffer such a fate for all eternity. The Passion of Christ is a mirror of what is to come. This mirror is no lie and no joke. Whatever Jesus says will happen, completely.

Bernard [6] was so terrified by the sufferings of Christ that he said, "At one time I thought I was secure. I didn't know a thing about the judgment that had been passed on me in heaven, until I saw that the eternal Son of God had mercy on me. I saw that He stepped forward and offered Himself on my behalf, receiving my judgment and taking my place. I can no longer feel so carelessly when I realize how serious the sufferings of Christ are." This is why Jesus commanded the women, "Do not cry for me. Cry for yourselves and your children" (Luke 23:28).

It is as if Jesus is saying, "Learn from my death what you have earned and what you deserve to receive." It is like a little dog is being killed in order to frighten a large dog. This is why the Prophet said, "All generations will lament and wail more than Him." He doesn't say they lament Him. They are lamenting for their own fate. This explains why the people were filled with terror in Acts 2:27, as I've already mentioned, and said to the Apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" The church sings, "I will ponder this diligently and then my soul will languish." [7]

A person should carefully consider this point. The benefit of Christ's sufferings depends entirely on a person coming to know himself well and being filled with terror to the point of death. If a person does not reach this point, the sufferings of Christ will really not benefit him. Christ's sufferings naturally make all people alike. As Christ died horribly in his body and soul for our sins, so we must, like him, die in our own consciences because of our sin. This does not take place through a lot of words, but by means of deep thought and a profound realization of our sins. Let me illustrate my point. Let's say an evil person kills the child of a prince or king without bothering you, and you continue singing and playing as if you were entirely innocent. Then you are arrested and

convinced that you were the reason the child was killed. You would be horrified! Your conscience would strike you deeply. So, you should be even more upset when you consider the sufferings of Christ. The Jews who killed Christ, and have now been judged and banished by God, were merely the servants of your sins. *You* are truly the one who strangled and crucified the Son of God through your sins.

If anyone is so cold and unfeeling that he is not terrified when he views the sufferings of Christ, he should tremble with fear. You must become like the pictures of Christ's sufferings. It can't be otherwise. Either here in time or in hell for all eternity. At the moment of your death, if not sooner, you need to fall into terror, tremble and shake with fear, and experience all that Christ suffered on the cross. It is terrible to wait until you die to do this. Pray to God and ask Him to soften your heart now and so you can meditate fruitfully on Christ's passion. It is impossible for us to meditate on the sufferings of Christ by our own ability or power. God must plant these sufferings into our heart. This meditation on Christ's suffering, as with all doctrine from God, is not given to you so that you can go off and do your own thing with it. No, you should always first search for God's grace and long for it. On your own, you can't do anything. Everything depends on God's grace. People who never view the sufferings of Christ correctly are the people who never call upon God and ask him to help them. Instead, they try to consider Christ's suffering on their own and end up regarding Christ's sufferings in a purely human and unfruitful way.

Let me say this very clearly and openly for all to hear. Whoever meditates on Christ's sufferings the right way for a day, an hour, even for fifteen minutes, *is* doing something far better than fasting for a whole year, praying all the Psalms every day, or listening to one hundred masses. The right kind of meditation on Christ's suffering changes a person's character. As in Baptism, a person is newly born again through such meditation. Then the sufferings of Christ are accomplishing their true, natural and noble work. They kill the Old Adam. They banish from us all lust, pleasure and security that we might think one of God's creatures can give us, just like Christ was forsaken by all, even by God.

We need to realize that feeling born again is not something that is up to us. It may be that sometimes we will pray for it, but do not receive it just then. We should not

despair, but keep on praying. At times it comes when we are not praying for it. God knows what we need. He will do what is best. It is free and unbound. It may be that when our consciences are causing us distress and we are deeply unhappy with our lives and what we have done we do not realize it, but the Passion of Christ is doing this to us. On the other hand, some people may think they are meditating on Christ's Passion, but they become so caught up in thinking about themselves that they can't work their way out of it. The first group are truly meditating on Christ's Passion, others are just making a show of it and it is false.

The Comfort of Christ's Suffering

Up to this point in our discussion, it is as if we have been in Passion Week and Good Friday. Now we come to Easter and Christ's Resurrection. When a person, whose conscience has been filled with terror, understands his sins in this light, he needs to watch out that his sins do not remain in his conscience, for then nothing but pure doubt will result. Just as our sins flowed out of Christ and we became aware of them, so we should pour them back on Him again and set our conscience free. Make sure you do not bite and devour one another with sins in your heart, running here and there with your own good works, trying to make satisfaction for them, trying to work your way out of your sins by means of indulgences. It is impossible! Unfortunately, it is still the case that many people, far and wide, think they find a refuge in such satisfactions and pilgrimages.

Take your sins and throw them on Christ. Believe with a joyful spirit that your sins are His wounds and sufferings. He carries them and makes satisfaction for them, as Isaiah 53:6 says, "The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." Peter says in 1 Peter 2:24, "He himself bore our sins in His body on the tree." In 2 Corinthians 5:21 Paul says, "For our sake, He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." You must rely on these verses from the Bible with all your might, even more when your conscience tries to kill you. You'll never find peace if you miss this opportunity to quiet your heart. You will have so much doubt that you will despair. If we dwell too much on our sins, going over and over them in our conscience, keeping them close to our hearts, soon they will become too much for us to manage and they will live forever. But when we see our sins laid on Christ and see Him triumph over

them by His Resurrection, and fearlessly believe this, our sins are dead and become nothing. Our sins don't stay on Christ, but are swallowed up by His resurrection. Now you see no wounds, no pain, no sight of sin at all in Him. That is why Paul says in Romans 4:25 that Jesus "was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification." In His sufferings Christ made our sins known and was crucified for them. By His resurrection He makes us righteous and frees from all sin. If you are not able to believe then pray to God for faith. This is entirely up to God. He gives faith at times very dramatically and openly, and at other times, secretly and quietly.

Therefore, here is what you need to do. First, stop looking at Christ's sufferings any longer. They have already done their work and have terrified you. Press forward through all difficulties and see His friendly heart. Look how full of love God's heart is for you. It was this love that moved Him to bear the heavy load of your conscience and sin. If you do this, your heart will be sweetly loving toward Him. The assurance of your faith will be stronger. Ascend higher through the heart of Christ to the heart of God and then you will see that Christ would not have been able to love you if God had not willed all this in His eternal love. Christ is obedient to this love, and so loves you. In the heart of God you will find a divine, good, fatherly heart. As Christ says, you will be drawn to the Father through Christ. Then you will understand what Christ meant when he said in John 3:16, "God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son." This is how we know God as He wants us to know Him. We know Him not by His power and wisdom, which terrify us, but by His goodness and love. There our faith and confidence stand unmovable. This is how a person is truly born again in God.

When your heart is set on Christ, you are an enemy of sin, because of love, and not because you are afraid of being punished. Christ's sufferings should be an example for your whole life. You should meditate on them in a different way. To this point we have considered Christ's Passion as a sacrament that works in us. Now we want to consider the sufferings of Christ in a different way, in a way that is something that works in us when we suffer. When the day comes that sickness and sorrow weigh you down, think how little it matters compared to the thorns and nails of Christ. If you have to do something you don't want, or can't do something you want to do, think about how Christ was led about by others, tied up as a prisoner. Does pride attack you? Look at how your

Lord was mocked and disgraced along with murderers. Do sexually impure thoughts and lust come your way, thrusting themselves on you? Think how bitter it was for Christ to have his tender flesh torn, pierced and beaten, again and again. Are hatred and envy at war within you, or are you seeking vengeance? Remember how Christ prayed for you, and all of his enemies, with many tears and cries. He had more reason than you to seek revenge! If any trouble or adversity trouble your body or soul, take heart! Say, “Why shouldn’t I also not suffer a little since my Lord sweat blood in the Garden because of his anxiety and grief? I would be a lazy, disgraceful servant if all I want to do is lie in bed while my Lord is forced to do battle with a painful death.”

This is how you find strength in Christ and are comforted when you struggle with all kinds vice and bad habits. This is the right way to meditate on the Passion of Christ. This is the fruit of His suffering. That is why somebody who meditates on Christ’s passion, in this way, really is doing something better than hearing the whole Passion story read, or reading all sorts of Masses. People who make the life and name of Christ part of their own life are truly called Christians, as Paul says in Gal. 5:24: “Those who are in Christ have crucified the flesh with all its passions and lusts.” We need to meditate on Christ’s passion, not with lots of words or with a showy display, but put it to true use in our lives. Paul admonishes us in Hebrews 12:3, “Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.” Peter says in 1 Peter 4:1: “Since Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking.” But this kind of meditation on Christ’s passion is not used much. It is very rare, although the Epistles of Paul and Peter are filled with it. We have changed the essence of meditation on Christ’s Passion into a show, and simply painted meditation on Christ’s passion in letters and on walls.

To God Alone Be the Glory!

Revised translation by:

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The First Sunday in Lent

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Notes

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1. Luther is alluding to a medieval German hymn, *Wretched Judas, What Have You Done?*
2. Albert Magnus (1193-1280) was a Scholastic theologian, a teacher of the most famous of all such theologians, Thomas Aquinas.
3. Luther is referring to the practice in his day of carrying around all kinds of Christian “trinkets” in a superstitious way as good luck charms, intended to ward off all sorts of dangers.
4. Much was made in Luther’s Germany about Christ leaving the home of his friends and supporters, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Veneration of Martha was widespread throughout Germany at this time.
5. Contemplations on all the events surrounding the actual crucifixion, such as meditating on Christ leaving Bethany, or on the suffering of the Virgin Mary to last up to five hours. Many times they would last even longer and people would fall asleep.
6. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), was a Cistercian monk, mystic and the founder of the Abbey of Clairvaux. He was held in high esteem by Luther, who often quotes him.
7. This could very well be from Bernard of Clairvaux hymn *Salve Caput Cruentatem*, later loosely paraphrased by the most famous of all Lutheran hymn writers, Paul Gerhardt in his hymn, *O Sacred Head Now Wounded*.

A Note About this Text

On April 5, 1519, Martin Luther sent a copy of his essay titled *A Sermon Concerning Meditation on the Holy Sufferings of Christ* to his friend George Spalatin. Within five years, it had been published in twenty-four editions. It was enormously

popular. It was translated into Latin in 1521. Later, when Luther put together helps and sermons for preachers, it was included as the sermon for Good Friday in the *Church Postil of 1525*.

This translation is based on the English translation that appeared in a 1906 collection of Luther's writings, titled *Lutherans in All Lands*. An alternate translation may be found in the American Edition of Luther's Works, Volume 42, pgs. 7ff.

The original edition of the text is found in the *Weimar Ausgabe* as *Ein Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi* in WA 2:136-142.