

A MEDITATION ON CHRIST'S PASSION¹

1519

Translated by Martin H. Bertram

INTRODUCTION

On Invocavit Sunday, March 13, 1519, Luther wrote his friend George Spalatin, "I am planning a treatise dealing with the meditation of Christ's passion. I do not know, however, whether I shall have enough leisure to write it out. Yet I shall try hard."² In the same letter he cites the reasons for this lack of leisure: activities directed toward the renewal of the university curriculum, his work on the Lord's Prayer,³ a commentary on Galatians, and particularly pressing and irksome, his intense study of canon law in preparation for the upcoming Leipzig Debate with John Eck, July 4 to 14. Nevertheless, it was a mere three weeks later, on April 5, that Luther was able to send a printed copy of his work on the passion to Spalatin.⁴

By 1524, a total of twenty-four editions had been printed in Wittenberg, Basel, Augsburg, Zurich, Erfurt, Munich, Nürnberg, and Strassburg. The number of editions testifies to the widespread response aroused by this writing. A Latin edition, whose translator is unknown, appeared at Wittenberg in 1521. As the sermon for Good Friday, this treatise was included in the *Church Postil* of 1525, which Luther termed his "very best book."⁵

The quick and widespread acceptance of this tract attests to the inner needs of the common people. Writings such as this, with their pastoral emphasis, attracted even more readers than those concerned with protest. While no single, specific cause can be cited which impelled a polemically busy Luther to write such a treatise, it can be assumed that his contact with the people in the parish forced him to take note of the areas in which the search for peace and salvation was most desperate. Although deep-rooted tradition provided the form in which they were embodied, the thoughts expressed by Luther were the early fruit of his evolving theology.

¹ Luther, M. (1999). *Vol. 42: Luther's works, vol. 42: Devotional Writings I* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.) (3–14). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

² LW 48, 114. Such meditations on the sufferings of Christ were a popular form of Lenten devotion during the Middle Ages. *MA*³ 1, 520.

³ See in volume 42, An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen, pp. 15–81.

⁴ *WA*, Br 1, 367.

⁵ *WA* 10^I, 1–2; 17^{II}, 21–22.

In the first three numbered paragraphs Luther discusses the false attitudes toward Christ's suffering which are based on blaming the Jews, on seeking a superficial benefit from the sufferings, and on a sentimental commiseration with Christ. Paragraphs four to eleven deal with the proper contemplation of the sufferings of Christ, stressing the need of seeing one's own sin as the cause of Christ's suffering, and how such knowledge should affect our faith and life. Moving from the cross to the comfort and assurance of Easter, Luther then arrives at the necessity of placing all our sin on Christ and emulating in our lives the qualities that Christ evidenced as he suffered for us.

Most of the twenty-four editions have title woodcuts showing the crucified Christ, with Mary and John standing at the foot of the cross. Others have woodcuts showing either Christ with an unidentified man kneeling before him, Christ sitting on a rock surrounded by instruments of torture, Christ at prayer in Gethsemane, or Christ and the torture instruments, with Christ holding a chalice in his left hand.

The translation is based on the German text, *Ein Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi*, in WA 2, (130) 136–142. A copy of this version is extant in the State Library in Munich and bears a dedication in Luther's handwriting: "P Magistro Venceslao...."⁶

⁶ Wenceslas Link, a close friend of Luther, was a preacher at Nürnberg. This text is accepted as the original, for it is unlikely that Luther would have dedicated any but the first print to one of his friends. Cf. LW 48, 169–170.

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1. Some people meditate on Christ's passion by venting their anger on the Jews.⁷ This singing and ranting about wretched Judas⁸ satisfies them, for they are in the habit of complaining about other people, of condemning and reproaching their adversaries. That might well be a meditation on the wickedness of Judas and the Jews, but not on the sufferings of Christ.

2. Some point to the manifold benefits and fruits that grow from contemplating Christ's passion. There is a saying ascribed to Albertus⁹ about this, that it is more beneficial to ponder Christ's passion just once than to fast a whole year or to pray a psalm daily, etc. These people follow this saying blindly and therefore do not reap the fruit of Christ's passion, for in so doing they are seeking their own advantage. They carry pictures and booklets, letters and crosses on their person. Some who travel afar do this in the belief that they thus protect themselves against water and sword, fire, and all sorts of perils.¹⁰ Christ's suffering is thus used to effect in them a lack of suffering contrary to his being and nature.

3. Some feel pity for Christ, lamenting and bewailing his innocence. They are like the women who followed Christ from Jerusalem and were chided and told by Christ that it would be better to weep for themselves and their children [Luke 23:27–28]. They are the kind of people who go far afield in their meditation on the passion, making much of Christ's farewell from Bethany¹¹ and of the Virgin Mary's anguish.¹² but never progressing beyond that, which is why so many hours are devoted to the contemplation of Christ's passion. Only God knows whether that is invented for the purpose of sleeping or of waking.¹³

Also to this group belong those who have learned what rich fruits the holy mass offers. In their simplemindedness they think it enough simply to hear mass. In support of this several teachers are cited to us

⁷ Luther's attitude toward the Jews finds frequent expression in his works. At the beginning of his career his position was one of benevolent hope of converting them to Christianity. This is reflected in this treatise, as well as in his *That Christ Was Born a Jew*, 1523 (LW 45, 195–229). Over the years his position changed, due largely to the adamant refusal of the Jews to accept his invitation to acknowledge Christ. This is evidenced in his treatise of 1547, *On the Jews and Their Lies*. WA 53, (412) 417–552.

⁸ Luther alludes to a medieval German hymn, *O du armer Judas, was hast du getan* ("Ah, Thou Wretched Judas, What Is It You Have Done?"). MA³ 1, 520.

⁹ Albert Magnus (1193–1280) was a scholastic theologian, often called "*Doctor universalis*," and a teacher of Thomas Aquinas.

¹⁰ Luther here directs his criticism at those who carry holy pictures, prayer books (cf. LW 43, 5–7), rosaries, etc., as amulets to ward off harm and danger, as well as those who undertake pilgrimages.

¹¹ John 12:1–8. The veneration of Martha was widespread in medieval Germany. See Stephen Beissel, *Geschichte der Verehrung Marthas in Deutschland während des Mittelalters* (Freiburg, 1909).

¹² John 19:25–27.

¹³ It was not unusual for such contemplations to last four or five hours. Often they were much longer, and the pious frequently fell asleep. On these devotional exercises, see Florenz Landmann, *Das Predigtwesen in Westfalen in der letzten Zeit des Mittelalters* (Münster, 1900), p. 75.¹³

who hold that the mass is *opere operati, non opere operantis*¹⁴, that it is effective in itself without our merit and worthiness, and that this is all that is needed. Yet the mass was not instituted for its own worthiness, but to make us worthy and to remind us of the passion of Christ. Where that is not done, we make of the mass a physical and unfruitful act, though even this is of some good. Of what help is it to you that God is God, if he is not God to you?¹⁵ Of what benefit is it to you that food and drink are good and wholesome in themselves if they are not healthful for you? And it is to be feared that many masses will not improve matters as long as we do not seek the right fruit in them.

4. They contemplate Christ's passion aright who view it with a terror-stricken heart and a despairing conscience. This terror must be felt as you witness the stern wrath and the unchanging earnestness with which God looks upon sin and sinners, so much so that he was unwilling to release sinners even for his only and dearest Son without his payment of the severest penalty for them. Thus he says in Isaiah 53 [:8], "I have chastised him for the transgressions of my people." If the dearest child is punished thus, what will be the fate of sinners?¹⁶ It must be an inexpressible and unbearable earnestness that forces such a great and infinite person to suffer and die to appease it. And if you seriously consider that it is God's very own Son, the eternal wisdom of the Father, who suffers, you will be terrified indeed. The more you think about it, the more intensely will you be frightened.

5. You must get this thought through your head and not doubt that you are the one who is torturing Christ thus, for your sins have surely wrought this. In Acts 2 [:36–37] St. Peter frightened the Jews like a peal of thunder when he said to all of them, "You crucified him." Consequently three thousand alarmed and terrified Jews asked the apostles on that one day, "O dear brethren, what shall we do now?" Therefore, when you see the nails piercing Christ's hands, you can be certain that it is your work. When you behold his crown of thorns, you may rest assured that these are your evil thoughts, etc.

6. For every nail that pierces Christ, more than one hundred thousand should in justice pierce you, yes, they should prick you forever and ever more painfully! When Christ is tortured by nails penetrating his hands and feet, you should eternally suffer the pain they inflict and the pain of even more cruel nails, which will in truth be the lot of those who do not avail themselves of Christ's passion. This earnest mirror¹⁷, Christ, will not lie or trifle, and whatever it points out will come to pass in full measure.

¹⁴ I.e., the mechanical performance of the mass makes it valid and effective, not the inward intent or disposition of the one who celebrates the mass.¹⁴

¹⁵ Ever more pronounced from this point on is Luther's emphasis on the *pro me, pro nobis* ("for me, for us"), reflecting the personal aspect of faith which Luther himself experienced and now expressed in all his writings.¹⁵

¹⁶ Cf. Luke 23:31.

¹⁷ I.e., the one in and through whom we see our sin in its starkness.¹⁷

7. St. Bernard¹⁸ was so terrified by this that he declared, “I regarded myself secure; I was not aware of the eternal sentence that had been passed on me in heaven until I saw that God’s only Son had compassion upon me and offered to bear this sentence for me. Alas, if the situation is that serious, I should not make light of it or feel secure.” We read that Christ commanded the women not to weep for him but for themselves and their children [Luke 23:28]. And he adds the reason for this, saying, “For if they do this to the green wood, what will happen when it is dry?” [Luke 23:31] He says as it were: From my martyrdom you can learn what it is that you really deserve and what your fate should be. Here the saying applies that the small dog is whipped to frighten the big dog. Thus the prophet¹⁹ said that all the generations on earth will bewail themselves over him; he does not say that they will bewail him, but that they will bewail themselves because of him. In like manner the people of whom we heard in Acts 2 [:36–37] were so frightened that they said to the apostles, “O brethren, what shall we do?” This is also the song of the church: “I will ponder this diligently and, as a result, my soul will languish within me.”²⁰

8. We must give ourselves wholly to this matter, for 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. Unless we seek that knowledge, we do not derive much benefit from Christ’s passion. The real and true work of Christ’s passion is to make man conformable to Christ, so that man’s conscience is tormented by his sins in like measure as Christ was pitifully tormented in body and soul by our sins. This does not call for many words but for profound reflection and a great awe of sins. Take this as an illustration: a criminal is sentenced to death for the murder of the child of a prince or a king. In the meantime you go your carefree way, singing and playing, until you are cruelly arrested and convicted of having inspired the murderer. Now the whole world closes in upon you, especially since your conscience also deserts you. You should be terrified even more by the meditation on Christ’s passion. For the evildoers, the Jews, whom God has judged and driven out, were only the servants of your sin; you are actually the one who, as we said, by his sin killed and crucified God’s Son.

¹⁸ St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), Cistercian monk, mystic, and founder of the abbey of Clairvaux, was held in high regard and frequently quoted by Luther.

¹⁹ Cf. Jer. 4:31.

²⁰ This hymn cannot be named with certainty, though it may well have been Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Salve Caput cruentatem*, later paraphrased freely by Paul Gerhard in his “O Sacred Head Now Wounded.”²⁰

9. He who is so hardhearted and callous as not to be terrified by Christ's passion and led to a knowledge of self, has reason to fear. For it is inevitable, whether in this life or in hell, that you will have to become conformable to Christ's image and suffering²¹. At the very least, you will sink into this terror in the hour of death and in purgatory²² and will tremble and quake and feel all that Christ suffered on the cross. Since it is horrible to lie waiting on your deathbed, you should pray God to soften your heart and let you now ponder Christ's passion with profit to you. Unless God inspires our heart, it is impossible for us of ourselves to meditate thoroughly on Christ's passion. No meditation or any other doctrine is granted to you that you might be boldly inspired by your own will to accomplish this. You must first seek God's grace and ask that it be accomplished by his grace and not by your own power. That is why the people we referred to above fail to view Christ's passion aright. They do not seek God's help for this, but look to their own ability to devise their own means of accomplishing this. They deal with the matter in a completely human but also unfruitful way.

10. We say without hesitation that he who contemplates God's sufferings for a day, an hour, yes, only a quarter of an hour, does better than to fast a whole year, pray a psalm daily, yes, better than to hear a hundred masses. This meditation changes man's being and, almost like baptism, gives him a new birth. 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 by God.

11. Since this [strangling of the old Adam] does not rest with us, it happens that we occasionally pray for it, and yet do not attain it at once. Nevertheless we should neither despair nor desist. At times this happens because we do not pray for it as God conceives of it and wishes it, for it must be left free and unfettered. Then man becomes sad in his conscience and grumbles to himself about the evil in his life. It may well be that he does not know that Christ's passion, to which he gives no thought, is effecting this in him, even as the others who do think of Christ's passion still do not gain this knowledge of self through it. For these the passion of Christ is hidden and genuine, while for those it is only unreal and misleading. In that way God often reverses matters, so that those who do not meditate on Christ's passion do meditate on it, and those who do not hear mass do hear it, and those who hear it do not hear it.

12. Until now we have sojourned in Passion Week and rightly celebrated Good Friday²³. Now we come to the resurrection of Christ, to the day of Easter. After man has thus become aware of his sin and is terrified in his heart, he must watch that sin does not remain in his conscience, for this would lead to sheer despair. Just as [our knowledge of] sin flowed from Christ and was acknowledged by us, so we must pour this sin back on him and free our conscience of it. Therefore beware, lest you do as those perverse people who torture their hearts with

²¹ Cf. I Cor. 15:49.

²² At this point in his career Luther did not question the doctrine of purgatory.²²

²³ See pp. xiv–xv. (Vol. 42)

their sins and strive to do the impossible, namely, get rid of their sins by running from one good work or penance to another, or by working their way out of this by means of indulgences. Unfortunately such false confidence in penance and pilgrimages is widespread.²⁴

13. You east your sins from yourself and onto Christ when you firmly believe that his wounds and sufferings are your sins, to be borne and paid for by him, as we read in Isaiah 53 [:6], “The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” St. Peter says, “in his body has he borne our sins on the wood of the cross” [I Pet. 2:24]. St. Paul says, “God has made him a sinner for us, so that through him we would be made just” [II Cor. 5:21]. You must stake everything on these and similar verses. The more your conscience torments you, the more tenaciously must you cling to them. If you do not do that, but presume to still your conscience with your contrition and penance, you will never obtain peace of mind, but will have to despair in the end. If we allow sin to remain in our conscience and try to deal with it there, or if we look at sin in our heart, it will be much too strong for us and will live on forever. But if we behold it resting on Christ and [see it] overcome by his resurrection, and then boldly believe this, even it is dead and nullified. Sin cannot remain on Christ, since it is swallowed up by his resurrection. Now you see no wounds, no pain in him, and no sign of sin. Thus St. Paul declares that “Christ died for our sin and rose for our justification” [Rom. 4:25]. That is to say, in his suffering Christ makes our sin known and thus destroys it, but through his resurrection he justifies us and delivers us from all sin, if we believe this.

14. If, as was said before, you cannot believe, you must entreat God for faith. This too rests entirely in the hands of God. What we said about suffering also applies here, namely, that sometimes faith is granted openly, sometimes in secret.

However, you can spur yourself on to believe. First of all, you must no longer contemplate the suffering of Christ (for this has already done its work and terrified you), but pass beyond that and see his friendly heart and how this heart beats with such love for you that it impels him to bear with pain your conscience and your sin. Then your heart will be filled with love for him, and the confidence of your faith will be strengthened. Now continue and rise beyond Christ’s heart to God’s heart and you will see that Christ would not have shown this love for you if God in his eternal love had not wanted this, for Christ’s love for you is due to his obedience to God. Thus you will find the divine and kind paternal heart, and, as Christ says, you will be drawn to the Father through him. Then you will understand the words of Christ, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, etc.” [John 3:16]. We know God aright when we grasp him not in his might or wisdom (for then he proves terrifying), but in his kindness and love. Then faith and confidence are able to exist, and then man is truly born anew in God.

²⁴ Luther was often critical of pilgrimages. See, for example, in this volume, p. 40, and LW 44, 86–87.²⁴

15. After your heart has thus become firm in Christ, and love, not fear of pain, has made you a foe of sin, then Christ's passion must from that day on become a pattern for your entire life. Henceforth you will have to see his passion differently. Until now we regarded it as a sacrament which is active in us while we are passive, but now we find that we too must be active, namely, in the following. 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 to 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."

So then, this is how we can draw strength and encouragement from Christ against every vice and failing. That is a proper contemplation of Christ's passion, and such are its fruits. And he who exercises himself in that way does better than to listen to every story of Christ's passion or to read all the masses. This is not to say that masses are of no value, but they do not help us in such meditation and exercise.

Those who thus make Christ's life and name a part of their own lives are true Christians. St. Paul says, "Those who belong to Christ have crucified their flesh with all its desires" [Gal. 5:24]. Christ's passion must be met not with words or forms, but with life and truth. Thus St. Paul exhorts us, "Consider him who endured such hostility from evil people against himself, so that you may be strengthened and not be weary at heart" [Heb. 12:3]. And St. Peter, "Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, strengthen and arm yourselves by meditating on this" [1 Pet. 4:1]. However, such meditation has become rare, although the letters of St. Paul and St. Peter abound with it. We have transformed the essence into semblance and painted our meditations on Christ's passion on walls and made them into letters.²⁵

²⁵ Text T, printed at Wittenberg in 1520, adds a final line: *Soli deo gloria*. WA 2, 142.²⁵