

The Passion of Jesus Christ

Isaiah 50:6 and Isaiah 53:3-7

Sermon

Preamble:

Today we mark the first Sunday in Lent, and we begin this solemn period of fasting and meditation, reflecting on the Passion of Jesus Christ.

1. The Passion of Christ as traditionally understood

Though every Christian would know that Jesus suffered and died for us, we tend to leave that thought at the surface level. Therefore, we need to refresh our memories about the true nature of His Passion every now and again. Passion is the Christian theological term normally used to denote the events and suffering of Jesus Christ, starting with His prayers at Gethsemane and ending with His death on the Cross.

The Passion of Christ can also refer to His intense feelings and actions of Compassion, forgiveness, and Love for His people. It seems appropriate that we expand the scope of His Passion to periods much before and much after the events of those last 12 hours of His earthly life. We will also attempt to see if science corroborates the details of His sufferings. Our brief discussions are aimed at provoking further thinking on the subject.

2. Jesus Christ was predestined to endure sufferings

The prophecies of Isaiah read to us provide almost a blow-by-blow account of what Jesus was predestined to suffer. It will not be out of place to mention here the four Servant Songs found in Isaiah Chapters 42:1-7; 49:1-7; 50:4-10, and 52:13-53:12. The first song mentions the call of the Servant and His Divine nature, the second song moves on to the Commission that He will reconcile God and Humanity, the third song amplifies His sufferings and the fourth song mentions His consummation in fulfilling the Divine Will in His sacrificial death and His subsequent exaltation. These songs hold proof that Jesus was predestined to endure sufferings which came 700 years later.

We know that there are other potential figures, including David, Moses, Jeremiah (Jer-ma-ya), Isaiah himself and Israelites as a community, who did endure sufferings in their servanthood. But we also know that it was Jesus who appropriated all those sufferings to their infinite extent and achieved the Divine Will of obtaining Redemption and Salvation for us.

3. The Passion of Christ began at the point in time when humanity fell from the grace of God

The Passion of Jesus Christ began, perhaps, many centuries before He endured the sufferings narrated in the Gospel accounts. Jesus as God the Son had participated in the creation event, and His pre-eminence is unquestionable. The fall of Adam set Him on His journey of Passion through the ages. Humanity continued to sin and disobey God, levying a cumulative burden of agony on the shoulders of Jesus Christ. For centuries He gladly bore this burden of agony because of His Passion for His people.

4. Jesus suffered in His human nature; did God the Father suffer with Him?

The real import of my earlier statement, that Jesus appropriated the sufferings of the entire human race, is sometimes lost to us, as we consider it something expected of Jesus. Our normal tendency is to forget the humanity of Jesus Christ and to see Him more in the mighty glory of His Divinity. We visualise Jesus as the Son of God with powers to heal, perform miracles, and even raise the dead. There are some who argue that, being Divine in nature, His suffering was superficial. I would dismiss such arguments as the height of absurdity.

The Gospel accounts, and prophecies concerning Christ's Passion, strike us by the very fact of His humanity. All through His life on this planet, He lived like a normal human being. But for the short-lived exhibition of His Divinity at the Transfiguration, we find no mention, whatsoever, of Jesus invoking His Divine powers for His personal benefit.

Some would like to pose another tricky question here. Can God be said to suffer? If we accept that God can be said to suffer, a point of contact is immediately established between God and the sufferings of the human race. God cannot then be thought of as being immune from the suffering of His creation. It therefore follows that God suffered in Christ. The Cross must be seen as an event between the Father and the Son, in which the Father suffers the death of His Son, though what actually transpired on this side of the Cross and on the other side will always remain a mystery to us.

A Scientific explanation

Science is not willing to offer an explanation for these events, but science is deficient in providing explanations for many other matters. Take, for example, the findings on atoms. Two atoms that have been kept in close proximity become entangled with one another, developing a kind of bond that defies human imagination. Even if you take these atoms to laboratories at distant locations, a measurement taken on the atom in location 'A' will instantly correlate with the outcome of the same measurement on the other atom in location 'B', however great the distance between them. Science does not fully explain why or how that happens, but scientists have firm evidence that it does happen. I offer this only as an illustration, not as scientific proof of anything about God, but it may help us approach, with a little more humility, the fact that a greater bond exists among God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. There is no doubt in my mind, therefore, that God the Father, in appropriating the sufferings of His Son, did suffer in Him.

5. 12 Hours from Gethsemane to Calvary: Does Science Corroborate the Passion Events?

In the course of my search for some scientific references on the events of those fateful 12 hours, I came across the widely cited study by William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, and Floyd E. Hosmer, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ" (Journal of the American Medical Association 255, no. 11, 21 March 1986, 1455-1463), which offers authentic reports on the medical consequences of what Jesus went through during those hours. For a change, science is found to corroborate these Biblical events fully.

As a carpenter by trade, Jesus participated in physical labour, and He spent much of His ministry travelling on foot across the hilly countryside. His stamina, strength, and physical condition must have been excellent when it all started.

a) Jesus prays in the garden of Gethsemane — (Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:37-42; Luke 22:39-44)

After the Passover celebration, Jesus takes His disciples to Gethsemane to pray. During His most anxious and intense prayer about the events to come, Jesus sweats drops of blood as per Luke's account. This is not a figurative speech as many would like to put it. There is a rare medical condition called **Hematohidrosis**, during which the capillary blood vessels that feed the sweat glands constrict due to extreme stress and then dilate to the point of rupture. Blood released from the vessels mixes with the sweat, resulting in the body sweating drops of blood. This condition results from life-threatening mental anguish, a state Jesus expresses by praying, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death." (Matthew 26:38). **Hematohidrosis** makes His skin tender, so at this point the physical condition of Jesus starts to **deteriorate**.

b) Jesus is made to undertake needless journeys — (Matthew 26:67-75; Mark 14:61-72; Luke 22:54-23:25; John 18:16-27)

The trial of Jesus by the Sanhedrin (San-he-drin) had two phases: one on the night of His arrest, and the second the next morning. Though they wished to condemn Him to death, they found the lack of evidence unhelpful. So they bound Jesus, led Him away, and handed Him over to Pilate. When Pilate learned that Jesus was under Herod's authority, he sent Him to Herod (Luke 23:7). Finally, it was back at Pilate's place that the sentence of crucifixion was confirmed.

We see that Jesus had to undertake considerable travel, going up and down the hilly area, which must have proved extremely strenuous for a person who had not slept at all during the night. We also have no evidence of Him drinking water or eating anything after the Last Supper. All through this ordeal He was also subjected to unbearable torture (Luke 22:63-65). At this stage, in addition to the tenderness of His skin, His **physical condition worsens further** and **dehydration** sets in.

c) Jesus is then flogged — (Matthew 27:26-32; Mark 15:15-21; Luke 23:25-26; John 19:1-28)

The whip used consisted of several strips of leather. In the middle of the strips were metal balls that hit the body harder, causing deep wounds. In addition, sheep bones were attached to the tips of each strip. When the bone makes contact with Jesus' skin, it digs into His muscles, tearing out chunks of flesh and exposing the bone. By this point, He has lost a great volume of blood, which causes His blood pressure to fall, putting Him in a state of shock, a well-known medical condition in such circumstances.

d) Roman soldiers place a crown of thorns on Jesus' head and drape a robe on His back (Matthew 27:28-29).

They struck Him in the head (Matthew 27:30), and the thorns from the crown pushed into the flesh; He begins to bleed and experience shooting pain down His face and neck. The robe they put on Him helps the blood to clot, thus preventing Jesus from sustaining more blood loss. They wanted Him to survive until they nailed Him to the Cross. He was then made to carry the Cross. His condition by now became so critical that He fell thrice on the way to Calvary.

e) Finally they Crucified Him — (Matthew 27: 33-56; Mark 15:22-41; Luke 23:27-49; John 19:17-37)

They nailed His “hands” to the Cross first while He lay down, with the nails going through His wrists, so that the bones in the lower portion of the hand could support the weight of the body. The huge nail (seven to nine inches long) cuts the major median nerve to the hand, causing continuous agonising pain up both His arms.

Once He is so secured, the guards lift the Cross to place it vertically on the ground. As it is lifted, His full weight pulls down on His nailed hands, and His shoulders and elbows dislocate, as predicted in Psalm 22:14: [I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint...]

His feet were nailed through the top. In this position, with the knees flexed at approximately 90 degrees, the weight of the body pushes down on the nails, and the ankles now support the weight. Again, it cuts through the blood vessel of the lower limb, causing acute pain from head to toe.

The diaphragm must move down and rise up to breathe in and out. As Jesus hangs on the Cross, the weight of His body pulls down on the diaphragm, and the air moves into His lungs and remains there. Jesus must push up on His nailed feet and hands, causing more pain, to exhale. A slight breeze would have caused excruciating (ex-cruci-ating) pain in every single part of His body.

The Gospels note that Jesus spoke seven times from the Cross. It is amazing that despite the kind of pain He was in, He pushes up to say, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34), another exhibition of His compassion and love for His people.

Medical science tells us that the difficulty in breathing leads to a slow form of suffocation. Decreased oxygen causes damage to the tissues, and the capillaries begin to leak watery fluid from the blood into the tissues, which collects around the heart and lungs. The collapsing lungs, failing heart, dehydration, and the inability to get sufficient oxygen to the tissues damage the heart permanently, leading to cardiac arrest and sudden death.

He was already dead, so they did not break His legs (John 19:33-34). Instead, the soldiers pierced His side to make sure that He was dead. In doing this, “forthwith came there out blood and water”, referring to the watery fluid surrounding the heart and lungs area discussed earlier.

6. The undying Passion of Jesus Christ

Having gone through death and then the resurrection, why did Jesus not go directly to the ascension? The answer is that it was His Passion for His people that caused Him to linger on, so that His disciples could take on His Passion for others. His Passion for people caused Him to ask for Peter, a Peter who had denied Him three times. His Passion for people caused Him to make a special appearance to see Thomas, because Thomas did not believe until he saw the nail prints in His hands and put his hand in His side.

What moves Jesus is His Passion for the backsliders. What moves Jesus is His Passion for those who want to believe but need to see a sign, a wonder, or a miracle.

The question this morning is what **really moves me and you?** Do we have a Passion for people like God the Father, Who so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son? Do we have a Passion for people like Jesus, Who gave His life not only for His friends but also for His enemies? In order to have a Passion like Jesus, we have to spend time with Him. While we accept Jesus as our Saviour, the **nuances of our time keep us from being as passionate as Christ.**

Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?

Conclusion:

I am sure none of us would have wanted to witness such gory details. While these unpleasant facts depict a brutal murder, the depth of Christ’s pain emphasises the true extent of God’s love for His creation. Teaching the physiology of Christ’s crucifixion is a constant reminder to us of the magnificent demonstration of God’s love that was expressed that day on Calvary. I am struck every time with the stunning realisation that, as a flesh-and-blood human, Jesus felt every ounce of this execution.

The Passion Jesus endured was for **me** and for **you** my friends! Surely we were not there when they nailed Him to the tree. But we are there today, doing to Him all that they did 2,000 years ago. We do it for all the times that we have not put Jesus first in our hearts and in our lives, for all the times we refused to extend a helping hand to someone in need, for all the times we refused to love our neighbour as ourselves, for all the times that we skipped church simply because we were “too busy” or “too tired,” for all the times we dragged our spouses to the divorce courts, for all the hate, all the lust, all the greed, and all the pride that we have harboured in our hearts, for all of these, and for **so much more** God the Son, Jesus Christ, continues to suffer for me and you.

Let us pray to our merciful Master, Jesus Christ, to grant us the wisdom, courage, and spiritual strength to introspect and cleanse our hearts of all those things that make Jesus suffer again and again, and to make a serious endeavour to

walk with Him for the rest of our lives as His true disciples, worthy of the blood He shed for us.

Amen