

HE SUFFERED, DIED AND WAS BURIED

Jerry Johnson

As Christians, we are all aware that Jesus suffered greatly, that he was crucified and that he died a human, physical death. But, why did this have to happen? Why did God himself take on human flesh and die a terrible, painful, humiliating death? We can examine this mystery from two perspectives. First, from God's perspective and secondly from the perspective of those who called for Jesus' crucifixion. Two totally different views based on very different understandings of truth. Understandings of Jesus himself, who is truth incarnate. Much of salvation history, given to us in Sacred Scripture, reveals that God's *justice* requires an immense sacrifice for the immense sinfulness of mankind. God's infinite *love* fulfills this need for sacrifice with the crucifixion and death of his only begotten Son, Jesus. Certainly we cannot expect to fully understand God the Father's will in the crucifixion of his own son. This seems so foreign to our sensibilities. But as with any mystery of faith, we can gain certain insights, which become more clear with a deepening life of prayer and communion with Jesus himself. As we read the beginning of Jesus' passion in the garden of Gethsemane, we see him fully immersed in the experience of his humanity. It's as though God desires, in Jesus, to fully unite himself to the reality of human suffering and the struggles that this suffering places before us. Jesus knows what he is about to experience and he pleads with the Father to allow his escape from this impending misery. He shows us that even God, enfleshed in humanity, does not desire to suffer

and is repulsed by it. But in the midst of this agony he is obedient. "...Not as I will, but as you will". (Matt 26:39) He has "learned obedience from what he suffered". (Heb 5:8) Since we will all experience pain and suffering in our lives because of the fall of Adam, God shows us, in Christ, how to face that pain. He identifies with the most extreme circumstances of human life. Can this be one purpose for the suffering and death he is about to enter into? Does he desire to so fully unite himself to us in order to share our suffering and give us hope in the midst of our pain? He does not reject this path to the cross, nor does he remove the cross from our life experience. He lives it with us and gives us the strength to endure and turn to him amid our struggles, great and small. In fact, this can lead us to a deeper union with him as we share the very human experience of pain and suffering. Our very salvation is a journey of faith united with Jesus on the cross, by which we are both cleansed and given the strength of his Spirit.

Now let's try to imagine ourselves as the religious leaders in Jerusalem at the time of Christ. For what reasons could we have called for the crucifixion of this teacher and miracle worker? We bear the responsibility for leading the chosen people of the one, true God. We are educated in the law and feel that God has given us this position of authority in order to carry out his will among the people. We face the oppression of a foreign ruler and must be diplomats as well, to protect the religious rights of the people we are called to lead. Now we encounter Jesus, the Nazorean. An uneducated, but seemingly wise

carpenter from a nondescript little town in Galilee. He has made many claims regarding the truth and the kingdom of God. Some of these seem to fly in the face of our own understanding of the law. He accuses us of hypocrisy and goes so far as to call us sons of Satan himself. Yet he is known among the people for performing a number of miracles and they are coming to him in great numbers. Is he leading our people astray? Is he a heretic and a crazy man? Eating and associating with lowly sinners and those who have no respect for the law. He claims to have the authority of God himself. Why is he healing on the Sabbath? Is he demonic? Is he possessed? How can we protect our people from this misguided teacher? Or is he truly a prophet, one of God's messengers sent to guide us to a deeper truth? We must decide. We are responsible to God. How should we deal with him? He is pushing us into an uncomfortable position. Backing us into a corner. Now he is claiming to be God himself! He calls us to eat his body and drink his blood. He has gone too far. This is heresy! We must act! God has given us the authority and we must carry out his will ... Here we reach the irony. These leaders *are* to carry out God's will. But not with the outcome they expect. They are not closing the door on a difficult and annoying preacher, but are opening a door to the fulfillment of salvation history! A door that will lead beyond the crucifixion and death of Jesus to the ultimate victory of his resurrection! They certainly do have an important role in God's plan.

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In the final analysis, it is our sin that is the cause and purpose of Christ's suffering and death. Why this had to be may be beyond our understanding at the moment. We are not always given the grace to fully comprehend the truth, but we are always called to give our assent to it. That is the essence of faith, which is itself the evidence of what we cannot see or understand.

(Heb 11:1) We accept and we believe that God sent his only son into the world, not condemn it, but to redeem it. To sacrifice his very life for the forgiveness of our sins. To bring us into joyful communion with him for eternity. The suffering and pain which Jesus endured gives meaning and purpose to our own experience. As we unite our suffering to his, we are cleansed and purified as through fire, (1 Cor 3:15) to bring us into a resur-

rection of peace and joy in Christ, who is life itself. This is the most precious gift of our salvation for which Jesus suffered and died. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life." (John 3:16) Jesus, we accept and we believe. Amen.

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SACRED SCRIPTURE



"Then he said to them, "My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch with me." He advanced a little and fell prostrate in prayer, saying, "My Father, * if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will." When he returned to his disciples he found them asleep. He said to Peter, "So you could not keep watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Withdrawing a second time, he prayed again, "My Father, if it is not possible that this cup pass without my drinking it, your will be done!"

(Matt 26:38-42)

"In the days when he was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Son though he was, * he learned obedience from what he suffered;" (Heb 5:7,8)

"The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him." (Rom 8:16,17)

SACRED TRADITION

"571 The Paschal mystery of Christ's cross and Resurrection stands at the center of the Good News that the apostles, and the Church following them, are to proclaim to the world. God's saving plan was accomplished "once for all" by the redemptive death of his

Son Jesus Christ. (CCC)

572 The Church remains faithful to the interpretation of "all the Scriptures" that Jesus gave both before and after his Passover: "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter

into his glory?" Jesus' sufferings took their historical, concrete form from the fact that he was "rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes," who handed "him to the Gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified." (CCC)

Thoughtful Questions

Do we remain and keep watch with Christ as we unite our suffering and trials to his or does our desire for ease and comfort cause us to pass this cup of sacrifice?

How does the crucifixion and death of Jesus make a difference in our life?