

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Messages	Pastor/Teacher
Text:	1 Peter 3:8-22	Gary L. W. Johnson
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THE PASSION OF CHRIST

In 1983 Rabbi Harold S. Kushner wrote an immensely popular book titled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.¹ Written in simple language, the author took human suffering very seriously and, to his credit, refused to offer glib or simplistic answers. Indeed, he was, as he painfully relates, driven to write this book because of the excruciating suffering he personally endured during the lingering illness and final death of his young son. As much as I may sympathize with Kushner in his desire to help people cope with suffering, the book is terribly flawed theologically. “God,” says Kushner “is **not** *all powerful*.” In fact, Kushner believes God to be quite limited.² Bad things happen simply because God cannot prevent them from happening. Kushner likewise does not take sin seriously. He assumes that since people are *good*, they are innocent and do not *deserve* hardship or suffering.

Theologians have spoken of the sufferings of Christ in the Latin expression *passio Christi*. Broadly conceived, the *passio Christi* extends to the entire *status humiliationis* or state of humiliation, i.e., from Christ’s birth to his death, during which he suffered all the common infirmities of the human race. More strictly, the *passio Christi* is the *passio magna*, or great suffering, of the final trials and crucifixion.³ The Apostles’ Creed stresses the fact that Jesus, the only Begotten Son of God, our Lord (note the emphasis on His Lordship) *suffered* under Pontius Pilate. Shedd identifies three kinds of suffering: (1) calamity, (2) chastisement, and (3) punishment or penalty. Calamity does not refer to sin and guilt. It is a kind of suffering that befalls man by the providence of God for other reasons than disciplinary or judicial. Calamitous suffering, however, it should be noticed, occurs only in a sinful world. Consequently, it is never found isolated and by itself alone. It is associated either with chastisement (as when a calamity falls upon a child of God) or with punishment (as when it falls upon the impenitent sinner). Calamity is therefore rather an element in suffering than the whole of the suffering. When, for illustration, some of the Galileans had been cruelly put to death by Pilate (Luke 13:1-5), our Lord distinctly told those who informed him of this fact that these Galileans “were not sinners above all the Galileans because they suffered such things.” They were sinners, but not the worst of sinners. In other words, he taught them that the whole of this suffering was not penal. As sinners, they deserved to suffer, and some of this suffering was for their sins. But as they were not greater sinners than other Galileans, they did not deserve a suffering that was so much greater than that of the Galilean people as a whole. A part of this extraordinary suffering, therefore, was calamity, not punishment. As such, it had no reference to the guilt of the Galileans. If it had, it would have been a proof that they “were sinners above all the Galileans.” Our Lord then repeats and emphasizes the same truth by an allusion to the fall of the tower in Siloam upon some of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. This event did not prove that these few persons were sinners “above all men that dwelled in Jerusalem.” There was, therefore, a calamitous as well as a penal element in this fall of the tower. The second species of suffering is chastisement. This is spoken of in Hebrews 12:6: “For whom the Lord loves, he chastens (*paideuei*).” Chastisement and punishment are distinguished from each other in 1 Corinthians 11:32: “When we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world.” The purpose of chastisement is discipline and moral improvement. The reason for it is not secret and unknown, as in the case of calamity. It is adapted to reform. It is administered by parental affection,

not by judicial severity. It is the form which suffering assumes within the family. The parent does not cause the child to feel pain for the satisfaction of justice, but for personal improvement. The suffering does indeed remind the child of his guilt and is suggestive of penalty, but it is not itself penal. Family discipline is not of the nature of retribution. The sufferings of Christ the mediator were vicariously penal or atoning because the intention, both on the part of the Father and the Son, was that they should satisfy justice for the sin of man. They were not calamity, for their object is known. The reason for calamitous suffering is secret. And they were not disciplinary, because Christ having no sin could not pass through a process of progressive sanctification. Scripture plainly teaches that our Lord's sufferings were vicariously retributive; that is, they were endured for the purpose of satisfying justice in the place of the actual transgressor: "Christ has once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust" (1 Pet. 3:18); "Christ was made a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13); "Immanuel was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities" (Isa. 53:5); "Jesus our Lord was delivered for our offenses" (Rom. 4:25); "he has made him to be sin [a sin offering] for us, who knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21); "he is the propitiation of our sins" (1 John 2:2); "behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29); "he spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32). With this, compare 2 Pet. 2:4: "He spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell." Penalty in the case of Christ was vicarious; in that of the fallen angels was personal.⁴ The New Testament over and over again declares that suffering was something Jesus had to endure. Luke 9:22 tells us plainly that He *must* suffer many things. We later learn that this was decreed (Luke 22:22). In other words, it was His vocation that He should suffer. It is important to note that our Lord did not view His suffering as coming from the arbitrary hand of fate or as attributed to pure chance. On the contrary, Jesus saw the hand of His Father in every aspect of life (cf. Matthew 16:21, Matthew 17:12, 22, 23; Mark 8:31, 4:12; Luke 17:25).

The Gospel narratives all highlight the scene at Golgotha. It is noon, and Jesus has been on the cross for three pain-filled hours. Three times He has spoken from the cursed tree, focusing on the well-being of others: He has lovingly prayed for His enemies, promised salvation to a thief, and made arrangements for His mother's care. Suddenly darkness falls on Calvary, and "over all the land" (v. 45). This darkness is no natural phenomenon; it is more than a thunderstorm and more than an eclipse. By a miraculous act of Almighty God, midday becomes midnight. This supernatural darkness is a symbol of God's judgment on sin. God is light and in Him is no darkness at all, Scripture tells us. The Bible often associates sin with darkness and holiness with light. So the physical darkness that covers Calvary signals a deeper and more fearsome darkness that Christ Himself has described as "outer darkness," or the darkness of hell, where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth." Klass Schilder captures the scene: "The context of the story is well-known to us. When Christ, while hanging on the cross, has suffered the first affliction, the acute act of the crucifixion, He enters upon the second phase of His suffering. From the catastrophe of the crucifixion He enters into the passion of being crucified. Gradually but certainly His blood ebbs. Gradually His wounds become swollen; these pained Him grievously; His blood congeals because it cannot course freely; fever consumes His body. The work has been done; the social act, save for the extreme sacrifice, has been finished. The intercession for the soldiers, the opening of Paradise to the murderer, and the assignment of the mother to John – these have taken place. When this work had been completed, God said: The preparation is finished; now follows the essence of the sacrifice itself; now He must enter upon the darkness of night. After the six preparatory seals the pre-emptory seventh seal of the book of death and the curse is broken. A hand intervened in the clouds; it hung a veil before the sun and receded again. Then it was dark. It was dark and that was all. Silence everywhere. A drop of blood fell to the ground. The centurion plainly heard it falling. It was quiet and that was all. That and the passion. And silence everywhere. Silence above, and silence below. The mockers dared go no farther. The tumult subsided. The chest of the murderer was heaving audibly; they in the back rows of the spectators – no, of the bystanders – could hear it."⁵

- I. ***SUFFERINGS OF CHRIST WERE REDEMPTIVE.*** The great High Priest enters Golgotha's Holy of Holies without friends or enemies. The Son of God is alone on the cross for three final hours, enduring what defies our imagination. Experiencing the full brunt of His Father's wrath, Jesus cannot stay silent. He cries out: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" This phrase represents the nadir, the lowest point, of Jesus' sufferings. Here Jesus descends into the essence of hell, the most extreme suffering ever experienced. It is a time so compacted, so infinite, so horrendous as to be incomprehensible and seemingly unsustainable. Jesus' cry does not in any way diminish His deity. Jesus does not cease being God before, during, or after this. Jesus' cry does not divide His human nature from His divine person or destroy the Trinity. Nor does it detach Him from the Holy Spirit. The Son lacks the comforts of the Spirit, but he does not lose the holiness of the Spirit. Nor does it cause Him to disavow His mission. Both the Father and Son knew from all eternity that Jesus would become the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world (Acts 15:18). It is unthinkable that the Son of God might question what is happening or be perplexed when His sense of His Father's loving presence departs.
- II. ***SUFFERINGS OF CHRIST WERE NECESSARY.*** Jesus declared more than once that he *must* suffer in this particular way (Luke 7:25, 24:7). The word translated "must" is the Greek word *dei* – it refers to that which must necessarily take place, often with the implication of inevitability. B. B. Warfield refers to the "*dei* of the Divine decree, as it has been appropriately called, by which is suggested the necessity which rules over historical sequences. It is used with a view to Jesus' own plan of redemption (by Jesus Himself, Luke 2:49, 4:43, 9:22, 13:33, 17:25, 24:7; John 3:14, 10:16, 12:34; by the evangelist, Matthew 16:21), to the underlying plan of God (by Jesus, Matthew 24:6; Mark 8:7, 10; Luke 21:9; by the writer, Matthew 17:10; Mark 11:11; Acts 3:21, 9:16), anon to the prophetic declaration as an indication of the underlying plan (by Jesus, Matthew 26:56; Luke 22:37, 24:26:44; by the writer, John 20:9; Acts 1:16, 17:3). This appeal, in either form, served an important apologetic purpose in the first proclamation of the gospel; but its fundamental significance is rooted, of course, in the conception of a Divine ordering of the whole course of history to the verist detail."⁶

CONCLUSION: Our Scripture memory for the month of June – Hebrews 4:14-16 – highlights the centrality of Christ's redemptive work as our great high priest. The late James Boice wrote: "Because of who God is and what Jesus Christ has done in dying for us, changing the throne of judgment into a throne of grace, we who trust Christ are to draw near the throne of grace in confidence. If we came in our own merit, we could have no confidence at all. The throne of God would be a place of terror. But since God has done what was needed to take away all judgment for our sin, it is now sin for us to come in any other way but with confidence. If we come in confidence, we can come knowing that God will do exactly what the author of Hebrews says he will do and we will indeed *find grace to help in time of need* (4:16). Whatever our need may be! Do you seek forgiveness of sin? You will find God's grace forgiving you for every sin. Do you need strength for daily living? You will find the grace of God providing strength. Do you need comfort because of some great loss? God will provide comfort. Direction for some important decision? You will receive direction. Encouragement? You will receive encouragement. Wisdom? That too. Remember what Paul wrote in Romans 8. *If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?* (vv. 31-32). So pray! That is what we need to do. We do not need more lessons on prayer or elaborate instructions on how to pray. What we need to do is pray. So pray! The Bible says, *You do not have, because you do not ask* (James 4:2). Jesus said, *Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you* (Matt. 7:7). God is not indifferent or hard of hearing or difficult to be entreated. He hears each and every one of our cries. He has opened the way and is easy to approach through Jesus Christ. He does not always answer as we expect or according

to our timetables, of course. His ways are not our ways; nor are his thoughts our thoughts (see Isa. 55:8). But he welcomes our prayers and delights to answer them. So why do we not pray? Can it be that we do not really believe that God is like this? Or do we just not believe we need his help? Abundant grace from the throne of grace. It is exactly what we need.”⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ H. S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (Avon, 1983). The book was so popular that it gave birth to a host of books accenting the same theme. Warren Wiersbe, in an attempt to give a distinctively Christian understanding of suffering, produced a helpful book titled *Why Us? When Bad Things Happen to God's People* (Revell, 1985). Richard E. Wentz in turn wrote *Why Do People Do Bad Things in the Name of Religion?* (Mercer, 1987).

² Kushner, p. 38.

³ The sufferings of Christ all have to do with the *Obedientia Christi*, the *obedience of Christ*; viz., Christ's obedient work as the Mediator; performed for our redemption, it was distinguished by the scholastics into *obediential active* and *obediential passive*, active and passive obedience. The *obediential active* describes the life of Christ from his birth to his passion, and particularly his ministry, during which Christ acted sinlessly and in perfect obedience to the will of God. The *obediential passive* refers to Christ's passion, during which he accepted passively, without any resistance, the suffering and cross to which he was subjected for the satisfaction of sin. According to the medieval scholastics, following Anselm, the *obediential active* was not of a vicarious or substitutionary nature, but rather was Christ's own necessary obedience under the law, the ground of Christ's own merit and therefore of his aptitude for the work of satisfaction. Had the Mediator *not* been meritorious before God, the payment of the *obediential passive* would have been exacted of him for his own disobedience and could not have been applied to believers. This view of his obedience relates directly to the medieval theory of penance and to the distinction between punishment (*poena*) and guilt (*culpa*). *Poena* accrues to anyone who is not actively obedient, while *culpa* is the result, qualitatively speaking, of sin. Since Christ's *obediential passive* accomplished the remission of sin (*remissio peccatorum*), those saved by grace through Christ have their *culpa* removed, but since Christ's *obediential active* was accomplished in order to constitute Christ as the worthy Mediator and not applied to sinners, the *poena* of sin remains and must be suffered temporally through the sacrament of penance. Following Luther, the Protestant scholastics, Lutheran and Reformed alike, argued that both the *obediential active* and the *obediential passive* were accomplished in the place and on behalf of believers and together constituted the one saving work of Christ, satisfying for both the *poena* and *culpa* of sin. Christ's obedience, then, according to the Protestant scholastics, remits sin in such a way as to make unnecessary the sacrament of penance. Note that this view of Christ's obedience conforms to the doctrine of justification *sola fide*, apart from the works of the law. Since the Protestant scholastics are adamant that the *obediential Christi* was totally soteriological in purpose, they often refer to it as a single obedience with two aspects rather than as an *obediential active* and an *obediential passive*. Thus the *obediential Christi* is both an *active passive*, as passive action, and a *passion active*, an active passion. *Actio passive* refers to Christ's subjection to the law, while *passio active* refers to the real obedience of his life and death. Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Baker, 1981), p. 205.

⁴ W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* 3rd ed. (P & R, 2003), pp. 711-720.

⁵ K. Schilder, *Christ In His Sufferings* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 371.

⁶ *Biblical and Theological Studies* (rpt. Presbyterian & Reformed, 1968), p. 304.

⁷ J. M. Boice, *Come To The Waters: Daily Bible Devotion for Spiritual Refreshment* (P & R, 2017), Dec. 2.