

“THE PASSION” and PAIN

This is not a reaction to the powerful film currently being shown for this was published in “*Firm Foundation*” January 18, 1966 and it is slightly revised from Chapter 5 of my “*Free To Speak*.” My aim, presumptuous as it may be, is not to detract from the message of the film but to point to some deeper meanings.

Are we saved by Jesus' pain? He suffered for us. He suffered what? To suffer means to endure or to experience. Passion (*pathema*) means a suffering or a passive emotion. We may suffer shame, loss, dishonor, pain, shipwreck, or wrong. The idea of enduring or experiencing is primary; the thought of pain is secondary. Jesus suffered death. He experienced death in our place. It is not his suffering primarily, but what he suffered, what he endured. In a similar way, God saves us through preaching. Yet it is not by preaching primarily, but what is preached. It is not by Jesus' enduring, but what He endured -- death.

The agony in the Garden did not expiate. Any blood shed in his abuse would not have atoned if he had not died. Under the Law, the blood of animals was offered. It represented the life of the animal. Had the animal not died, the blood would have been ineffective. Jesus' blood represents the life offered instead of ours. We are not saved by his wonderful life, his teachings, his miracles, his pain, but by his death. By means of this experience he accepted the wages of our sins and conquered death for us.

"But the idea of sacrifice always implies pain," you may object. Does it? Literally, the word "sacrifice" means "to slaughter." More basically, it means "to offer, to make an offering." Any offering, whether it be a song, a prayer, a dollar, or a cup of cold water, is a sacrifice. The thought of pain or impoverishing is not in the word. Jesus offered himself in our place, but the endurance of pain was incidental to the offering.

What about us; aren't we supposed to "sacrifice," to "give till it hurts?" "*Let us offer up a sacrifice of praise.*" Does that mean that we must sing or shout praise until our throats hurt?

When the rich Abraham sacrificed, did he impoverish or pain himself? Is this concept of pain or privation inherent in any of the Mosaic laws concerning sacrifices?

"Give till it hurts" is foreign to Christianity. Give till you feel good. It makes one happier to give than to receive, Jesus said. Christian service is done cheerfully and willingly, not out of necessity or constraint. Expressing love does not hurt, but it makes one happy.

"Doing our duty" (a vain effort!) may be drudgery or painful, but showing love is fulfilling. If all of your Christian service is not fulfilling and does not make you happier, then a new appraisal of your discipleship is in order. Duty can be performed legalistically with hints of meritorious achievement. Not so with love.

In order to bind this "Do your duty" concept, an idea of meritorious suffering has been attached to the term "sacrifice" describing our service. We offer sheaves, not lambs. Man cannot offer sacrifices of merit or atonement; he can only bring offerings of praise and thanksgiving.

Early in church history the Gnostics thought that matter and the flesh were inherently evil. From this developed the asceticism of the early centuries -- purging by pain, privation, and poverty. Further development brought forth the doctrines of penance, purgatory, indulgences, and the grotesque emphasis of the physical agony of Jesus. All of these are built upon a false premise.

We need to take the Lord's Supper out of Gethsemane and put it back on Golgotha.

A frustrated conscience in many devoted disciples makes them enjoy a lashing, whipping harangue of a sermon. By their pained consciences they feel that some retribution has been paid, some satisfaction has been met for their sins. While it is true that the impenitent must be brought to penitence, the purpose of it is not to foster this concept. It is true that Jesus sometimes preached cutting sermons, but they were addressed to the calloused hypocrites, not to the devout.

Blessed is the man who overcomes trial and temptation. Blessed, also, is the man who has less to overcome. When the tree stood through the storm, it demonstrated strength, but did that tree that stood against frequent blasts bear more fruit or make better lumber than the tree which knew nothing but calm?

In bearing the penalty of our sins, Jesus endured extreme mental agony. In the process of his physical death, there was extreme physical pain. This is not being overlooked. However, Jesus' sorrows, wounds, chastisement, stripes, etc. of Isaiah 53 were not physical endurances which are powerless to atone, but they were the spiritual wounds of combat in which Jesus died – the wounds we should have suffered. In the circumstance of the Christian life, men have been impoverished, imprisoned, whipped and tortured with a similar degree of physical pain that Jesus bore. Man has little capacity to share his mental and spiritual agony, however. But Jesus' agony did not expiate, nor can our being tortured make us merit more grace.

When we deny ourselves and take up our cross, we are saying, "Lord, my life is an offering of thanksgiving to you. I have been crucified with Christ. My life now will be a daily offering. Not my will but yours be done. Please accept me and use me."

More to follow if the Lord wills. []

(Cecil Hook: May 2004)

"I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).