

UNIT THREE: JESUS

SESSION THIRTEEN: JESUS' PASSION

Summary of the Thirteenth Session of the Course

For the first time, we will need two sessions to complete one lesson, and there could not be a more appropriate topic to extend, because Jesus' suffering and death are the heart of our faith, hope, and salvation. As much as we might like to make his resurrection the center of our faith, it is not (although it would be foolish to separate the crucifixion and resurrection from each other, because neither could stand alone). Not only is the cross our central symbol, but everything the cross represents is our central reality. For this reason, Paul told the Corinthians he determined to know nothing while he was among them, except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Passion

The popular understanding of passion has to do with sexuality and romance, but the word comes from Latin and means "suffering." For our purposes, it means specifically the suffering that is endured because of love, and so passion includes the intense love itself. Compassion means feeling with another person, especially feeling the other's pain or grief; literally the word compassion means "suffering with."

In our study of the prophets, we heard the anger, grief, and longing of Yahweh God's passionate love for Israel. Especially from Hosea, we heard the crisis to which love brought God. On one side was anger, on the other longing. Yahweh could not endure Israel's unfaithfulness and corruption another minute, but could not bear to give up the people, either. In Hosea 11, the prophet takes us back and forth between judgment and compassion, and Yahweh is the one caught in the middle, torn by the conflict.

For most of Christianity's centuries, however, the church insisted firmly that God could not suffer – that God was above suffering and incapable of it. The reason for this insistence was the church's use of classical attributes of God, taken from philosophy, which included the assertions that God is (and must be) *impassible* and *immutable*. Impassible means incapable of suffering, and immutable means incapable of change. The idea was that God is perfect and perfection cannot change, because if it did change it could no longer be perfect. It's as though perfection were the very top of a mountain, and so any movement in any direction would be a step downward. Suffering represented both change and weakness, and so it was decreed that God could not suffer.

In contrast, the New Testament presents God's perfection as love, and love certainly can be moved. Love can and does suffer, and anyone who loves must be willing to suffer – including God. Love makes anyone vulnerable. The church, however, was not willing to allow the idea that God could be vulnerable. We had to choose between God's perfection (defined by the philosophical attributes of perfection) and God's love. We chose perfection. Wrong choice.

Only in the 20th Century did theologians truly become free to talk about God's passion. In earlier times, Christian theologians tended to dismiss the Old Testament as naively "anthropomorphic" in talking about God. Anthropomorphisms are "human forms." When the prophets speak of Yahweh God as angry, hurt, or grief-stricken they are, the theologians said, projecting human emotions (wrongly or, at least, naively) onto God. The prophets even speak of Yahweh's repenting (having a change of mind and heart), which is impossible for the "perfect" God of the philosophers. Any change would mean there was room for change, and they allowed perfection no room for change. This static and sterile view of perfection severely restricted God, to the point where some claimed that, strictly speaking, God could only think and only about God's own thoughts. Could such a God love? The honest answer was, "No." The Bible, however, insists so strongly that God does love (and even "is love") that love had to be redefined to fit the definition of perfection, but such love allows no passion and cannot be affected in any way by the one loved. So, in what sense can it rightly be called love?

The Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel and the Protestant theologian Jurgen Moltmann have helped us greatly to recover the passion of the God who loves and whose perfection is love. Heschel insisted (in a 2-volume work entitled, *The Prophets*) that compassion, justice, mercy, and such passionate qualities are not anthropomorphisms (human forms or qualities) at all but theomorphisms, "God forms" or qualities. These God-forms may be found sometimes, in limited ways, in humans, but they come from God. Moltmann (especially in his book, *The Crucified God*) insists, not only that the Son can and did suffer on the cross, but also that God the Father suffered the Son's death, too – that the Father was torn apart by grief. Such a contention remains highly controversial, but I believe it makes much better sense and is much truer to the prophetic witness to God's love. Otherwise, we have an all-knowing, all-powerful God the Father almighty who remains high above Jesus' mortal suffering, shame, and death – unmoved, unconcerned, unaffected. Such a view makes Jesus the (willing) victim but leaves God the Father in the position of having willed it and watched it without feeling. All in the name of preserving God's perfection, we are left with a Father who could watch unmoved as his Son dies in agony.

Even the question of Jesus' suffering has been debated. Did he suffer, or did just his human nature suffer? The idea would be that his divine nature would be incapable of suffering. Such views have sterilized the crucifixion, and we can see the placid Jesus on the cross in many Christian paintings. Gone are the agony, the torture, and the shame of crucifixion.

Love makes anyone vulnerable, even God. And God loves.

“He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that makes us whole, and by his stripes we are healed.” (From Isaiah 53).

Why Did People Turn Against Jesus?

We went back to the parable of the *Prodigal Son*, to the older brother who bitterly resents the father’s love for the younger son. People who lived by the principle of reward and punishment did not appreciate Jesus (and still don’t). They considered themselves good and wanted to be rewarded for their goodness. Our Presbyterian *Confession of 1967* says Jesus’ life and teaching judged “his people’s goodness,” for which they turned against him. People may accept judgment upon their sins and failures, but they do not easily tolerate judgment upon their virtue and goodness. By telling such parables as the *Pharisee and the Tax Collector* and the *Good Samaritan*, Jesus aroused their indignation and hatred. He even told the proud religious people the prostitutes and tax collectors would enter the kingdom of God ahead of them.

So, the good people were the ones who came to hate him and who plotted his death. In the gospels, Jesus warns his disciples he will be rejected, made to suffer, and put to death. He goes to Jerusalem knowing he will be killed there.

Holy Week

We had nearly reached the end of the hour when we began discussing the events of what we now call Holy Week, and we should probably review those we did discuss, including the triumphal entry (Palm Sunday), the controversies in the temple (throughout the week), and the institution of the Lord’s Supper (Maundy Thursday). We spent the most time talking about the Last Supper/Lord’s Supper.

How could Jesus help his disciples understand what was about to happen to him? How could he make them understand it was for them that he would suffer and die? According to the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), the Last Supper was a Passover meal. So, the bread would have been matzah and the cup one of the four cups of wine used in the Seder. Symbolically, he gives himself to them, his body and his blood. The next day, he will do so for real. They need to understand, to feel, to know. They will also need a way to remember and to participate in receiving what he has given them. What will happen in Jesus’ crucifixion must remain always a present reality for them, and they must know it is always for them.

We spent time discussing my contention that the crucifixion is always a present reality to God, for two reasons. The first (and harder to understand) is that God is eternal, and so the past can be as present for God as the present. Besides, the hurt was so deep, how could it ever go away or be put out of mind, even a little? Human beings never completely heal from deep grief; they carry it with them for the rest of their lives. The loss of the loved one is an ever present reality, with

hundreds of reminders. The second reason the crucifixion remains a present reality for God is that God sees the death of Jesus in the sufferings and deaths of other human beings with whom Jesus shares flesh and blood. In his passion, Jesus is united with all who suffer, who feel abandoned by God, who are put to shame. Jesus' union with us is the central truth of his crucifixion – rather, it is one-half of the central truth. The other half is his union with God. I believe there is, for God, no end to Jesus' suffering – certainly not so long as life and the world continue to inflict suffering upon all the people God loves. I believe God sees and feels Jesus' death in the death of every person.

Imagine being invited to a meal with a family that had lost a loved one who had given himself or herself to suffering and death for the sake of someone else. Imagine that family has some part of the meal they observe as memorial to their dead son or daughter, and they invite you to share in that memorial with them.

The objection to such thinking comes in the resurrection. God quickly got Jesus back, and so we imagine the grief ended. I don't think so. For both of the reasons given above, I think that for God the grief continues: because the crucifixion is forever a present reality to God (the most horrible reality imaginable) and because the suffering is repeated every day in the sufferings of people God loves. When we crucify each other (in whatever way), we re-crucify Jesus before God. Jesus himself says, "As you have done it to one of the least important of these, my brother or sister, you have done it to me."