

## The Inner Passion of the Christ

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**Readings:** Isaiah 53 *By his wounds we are healed*  
Mark 15:22–39 *The crucifixion of Jesus*  
Arcana Coelestia #4735.9 *The Lord's passion*

*He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5)*

Well, I've finally gone and done it. I finally went to see Mel's Movie: "The Passion of the Christ." I figured that if I was going to do it, I'd better do it before Palm Sunday and Holy Week. I must admit, I have been avoiding this movie. You have probably read the reviews, and some of you may have seen it. Just as the reviews say, it is a relentless bloodbath. It's a very difficult movie to sit through.

The scenes focus on the physical suffering. And I think that is why, at the end of the movie, I felt unsatisfied. Yes, it was a portrayal of the brutality that took place in those days. And I don't doubt that there were floggings just as brutal as the one depicted in the movie. Yet it seemed that the main point of the movie was to show the brutality, the suffering, and the physical pain. There were brief flashbacks of Jesus' life and message—and long, drawn-out scenes of physical torture. The whipping scene was certainly the longest and most explicit I have ever seen in any movie. And the scene of Jesus bearing his cross from the city of Jerusalem out to Golgotha seemed to take up about half the movie! It just kept going and going, with Jesus being brutalized the whole way.

Yes, it was a very difficult movie to sit through. And it left me unsatisfied. It seemed to focus on the *outer* suffering—which was, indeed, real—to the neglect of the *inner* suffering that was taking place within Jesus, and that he struggled with throughout his life.

So my theme for this morning is "The *Inner* Passion of the Christ."

This movie was touted beforehand as an accurate portrayal of the Gospel story of Christ's last twelve hours. To some extent, it was. But it did take liberties. And it certainly was an *interpretation*, just as every other movie about Jesus is an interpretation.

In particular, this movie draws on traditional Christian theology, which says that the Lord's suffering was necessary in order to pay the price for our sins. That price had to be paid in order to satisfy the wrath, or the justice, of God the Father. "All we, like sheep, have gone astray" (Isaiah 53:6). And God the Father is angry with us because we have sinned. Or God the Father has a "perfect sense of justice," which must be satisfied. *Someone* had to pay the price for our sins. And that someone had to be Jesus Christ—God's own Son.

In this view, our salvation is in each drop of Christ's blood. And in the movie, there was plenty of it! From the perspective of the movie's director, Christ's blood was the salvation of our souls. So the blood and gore become the focus of the movie.

This idea of salvation strikes me as similar to the idea that the police must put someone away for every murder, even if they get the wrong man. *Someone* has to pay for the life that was taken! Or it is similar to our country's response to the attacks of September 11, 2001. *Someone* had to pay for it! Even if we were not quite sure who did it, or couldn't quite get at them, we had to punish *someone* for what was done to us. And the punishment had to be *big!*

It is the same in the traditional Christian view of God the Father's attitude toward Christ's suffering. *Someone* had suffer for the sins that we humans committed! And if we weak and limited humans couldn't suffer enough to pay the price, then God's Son Jesus would do it for us.

From our church's perspective, this view of God's nature is based on an interpretation of the Bible that is comes from physical-mindedness rather than from spiritual understanding. I cannot accept such a view of God. And I presume, since you are here in this church, that you cannot accept it either.

Emanuel Swedenborg, the great theologian of our church, utterly rejected this vindictive view of God. One of his most potent expressions of this is in *True Christian Religion* #132. I would like to read part of it to you. Swedenborg had a flair for the dramatic at times, and I found this passage quite compelling. He introduces the subject by saying:

It is a fundamental error on the part of the Christian Church to believe that the passion on the cross was the real act of redemption. That error, together with the erroneous belief in three divine persons existing from eternity, has so corrupted the whole Christian Church that there is not a scrap of spirituality left in it.

This is what brought home to me the realization that this movie is all about the *physical*; it is not about the spiritual at all. A vast number of Christians focus on the physical side of things rather than on the spiritual—which is the true meaning and reality of the crucifixion.

Now let's see what Swedenborg has to say about the traditional Christian view of the Atonement and the Passion of Christ. It is good to keep in mind that this was written over two hundred years ago. Some parts of Christianity have moved beyond what he writes here. Other parts of Christianity, though, are still stuck right where he describes them. He says:

Is there any subject that does more to fill and pack the books of orthodox theology today, or is taught and driven home more zealously in colleges, and is more often preached and ranted about in pulpits, than the belief that God the Father, in his anger with the human race, not only drove it away from him, but actually placed it under the ban of universal damnation, thus excommunicating it? But because he is gracious, he persuaded or forced his own Son to come down and take upon himself the sentence of damnation, so as to appease his Father's anger—and it is only in this way that he is able to look upon human beings with any favor?

They add that this was accomplished by the Son, who, in order to take upon himself the damnation of the human race, allowed himself to be flogged by the Jews, have his face spat upon, and then be crucified as "accursed in the sight of God" (Deuteronomy 21:23). The Father was propitiated when this had been done, and through his love for his Son revoked the damnation—but only for those for whom the Son interceded, so that he became in perpetuity a Mediator with his Father. These and similar phrases ring through our churches today, re-echoing from the walls like the echoes in woodlands, and filling the ears of all listeners.

But is there anyone whose rationality is enlightened and made whole by reading the Bible who cannot see that God is mercy and compassion itself, since he is love itself and good itself, and these qualities are his essence? And that it is therefore a contradiction to say that mercy itself or good itself could look upon humans in anger, and pass a sentence of damnation on them, and still remain what he is in his divine essence? Such actions can hardly be attributed to upright people, but rather to evil people; nor to angels of heaven, but rather to spirits from hell. So it is an unspeakable crime to attribute such acts to God.

This is Swedenborg's Bible-based perspective on the traditional Christian view of the Atonement. He is saying, in essence: How could God, who *is* love (1 John 4:8, 16), feel anything *but* love for the human race? How could God feel wrath toward us, and want us punished? How could God want his own Son Jesus to suffer for our sins, as is taught in traditional Christianity?

These are not things that good people feel and do. If we are truly upright, we do not wish evil upon our enemies. Rather, if someone has done wrong to us, we wish that they would reform. We don't desire punishment for those who have hurt us, and we don't feel vindictive toward them. Rather, if we truly have God's love in our heart, we wish for reconciliation; we wish for "atonement," to use the Christian term. So to attribute anger, wrath, and harsh justice to God is a terrible insult upon the nature of the Divine.

In our church, we do not believe in the kind of theology that says that the physical suffering of Jesus Christ would satisfy the anger, wrath, and justice of God. We don't believe that. And if we look at the story of the crucifixion, we find that it was not *God* who punished Jesus. It was the evil people of his day who punished Jesus. It was *human beings* who punished Jesus. And God, I believe, was standing by in mercy, weeping at what was taking place.

For Jesus Christ himself, though the physical pain was certainly terrible to bear, the *inner* pain was far greater. The inner pain was this: The whole reason that the Lord came to this earth was to reach out to people in love, and to show people the truth. And what he got from most of the people was rejection and insults and murderous hatred toward the truth, goodness, and love that he was bringing to them. That was what he met on this earth.

The greatest passion of Christ was not the physical suffering. It was knowing that people were digging their own graves by rejecting the love and the goodness and the truth that the Lord brought to them. It was knowing that people were making a life of hell for themselves, and shutting themselves out of the heaven that the Lord longs to give us.

Christ's suffering was not for his own sake. He could take the physical and emotional pain. He knew that he had a connection with his divine Father. And he looked out and felt a terrible pity and compassion for the people. When he came to the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he wept over it (Luke 19:41). Later, while he was teaching the people in the Temple, he said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Matthew 23:37).

It was out of pure mercy and love that God came to us as Jesus. He came because he wanted to reach out to us. And the passion of the Christ was knowing that so many would reject that love—that so many *were* rejecting that love, and expressing their rejection through the insults and abuse and torture and death that they heaped upon him. That was the *inner* passion of the Christ. It was the pain of knowing that so many would choose eternal pain and death over eternal life and joy.

Today, the Lord has the same struggle in our world. The Lord has the same struggle with those who would reject the higher way—the way of love and mercy and truth and justice—and would instead grasp for their own pleasure and power. The Lord has the same struggle and passion in our world that he did two thousand years ago.

He has the same struggle and the same passion in each one of us as well. Jesus is struggling in every one of us. He is struggling in our own souls to bring us out of our way of selfishness, out of the way of thinking only of our own pleasure, out of our false materialism, and into the true and deep love that he wishes to give us. He is struggling within us to save each one of us, to bring us toward the good. And he is doing this, not for the sake of his own pleasure and glory, but because *he loves us*, and he wants us to be happy. He wants us to be fulfilled and satisfied. He wants us to have the same joy and love that he feels for us.

This is his passion within us today. This is his passion in our world today. It is a passion to save the entire human race. It is a passion to save each one of us. It is a passion to save you. It is a passion to save me. This is the *inner* passion of Christ.

I believe that this is what he was thinking of when he was hanging on the cross. He was not thinking of the physical pain. He was thinking of all those who would come to him because he was lifted up in that way. He had said to his disciples, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). And we can see in his struggles and his suffering the true nature of God's love for us: that God would come to us from his place of complete bliss at the center of the universe, come to us out here in this cold and dark world, and suffer all those things purely to show us what God's love is truly all about.

That was his struggle; that was his mission; that was why he was willing to suffer and die for us. He wanted us to know that he, that God, will do *anything* for us. God will suffer for us. God will *die* for us in order to show us what true divine love is. That is the message. That is the passion. That is the powerful and comforting assurance that God gives us today.

God is there for us. And there is nothing we can do, there is no insult we can heap upon our Lord, there is no type of abandonment we can commit against our Lord that will cause him to turn away from us. No matter what we may have done, no matter how bad we may think we are, Jesus *loves* us; God *loves* us. And God is reaching out to us, asking us to turn toward him, to accept him into our lives, and to live in the love that is Jesus Christ. Amen.