

Sermons on the Passion of Christ.

First Passion Sermon

The Occurrences At The Mount Of Olives.

Martin Luther, "First Passion Sermon," Matthias Loy, ed., *Dr. Martin Luther's House-Postil, or, Sermons on the Gospels for the Sundays and Principal Festivals of the Church Year. Volume 2. Two Volumes. Second Edition.* (Columbus, Ohio; J. A. Schulze, 1884), pp. 64-81.

Matthew 26, 36-46

Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane, and saith unto the disciples, Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder. And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and very heavy. Then saith He unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me. And He went a little further, and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt. And He cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, Thy will be done. And He came and found them asleep again: for their eyes were heavy. And He left them, and went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. Then cometh He to His disciples, and saith unto them, Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man, is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray me.

This is a beautiful narrative, and presents the true beginning of the sufferings of our Lord Jesus. It is profitable both for doctrine, showing how our Lord conducted Himself in His sufferings, and for consolation in the anguish of sin and an evil conscience.

The scholastics disputed much and diffusely about the events here narrated. It is, indeed, no trifling matter that such great fear, trembling and anguish should take possession of this person, who is, at the same time, eternal God and true man. But let men dispute about this as much as they will, and let them be ever so penetrating and subtile, it can never be fathomed! Yea, it is impossible to comprehend such grief and terror; they are beyond the reach of our minds, and this

simply because the person who sustains them is exalted far above all things. We must, therefore, be content with understanding those inferior instances of sorrow or fear which we actually see. Such instances we have in the case of those poor wretches who are condemned to death for their crimes. Before these can become reconciled to their fate, they writhe in death's agony and struggle with death; and, sometimes, they cannot endure such anguish, and are even overwhelmed with fear, so that they can neither hear nor see, and do not understand what is spoken to them nor what they tell others, but are unconscious and even grow stiff, like one who knows neither where he is nor what ails him.

But here we must rather consider those whose grief and anguish are so intense, that they fear and tremble on their account; whose hearts are so pierced with wretchedness and terror that they would rather die than suffer them. Such excruciating pain is experienced by those hearts which wrestle with the fear of God's wrath or the violent onslaughts of despair. We may be assured that such great grief and terror assaulted our Lord on this occasion, so that He stood trembling and quaking before His disciples, who were affrighted and could not conceive what had befallen Him. This is beautifully indicated by Luke where he says that when the Lord "was come to His disciples, He found them sleeping for sorrow;" and here by the Lord Himself in the words: "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death," that is, I am so full of anguish, that I could die of agony. Our thoughts cannot go beyond this; for we know of no anguish that transcends such anguish unto death. But even the pangs of death cannot properly be compared with the agony of the Lord Jesus; for His was of such exceeding violence that no human heart could have borne it. And for this very reason it declares Christ to have been true man, else it could not have affected Him, and true God, else He could not have borne and conquered it. Our flesh and blood can not endure and conquer thus; human nature, yea, even the nature of angels, is by far too feeble to hold out in such distress. For it was not the only sorrow of the Lord Jesus that the hour was now at hand, in which He should be betrayed by Judas, taken captive by the Jews, nailed to the cross by the Gentiles, and suffer death; but that the sins of the whole world were upon Him, and that the death He was about to suffer was a death incurred by sin and the wrath of God. Since He became a substitute for us all, and took upon Himself our sins, that He might bear God's terrible wrath against sin and expiate our guilt, He necessarily felt the sin of the whole world, together with the entire wrath of God, and

afterwards the agony of death on account of this sin. This is the point which makes it evident that we can neither adequately speak of such sufferings and anguish, nor even meditate upon them. While each of us has merely his own sins upon him, Christ alone bears the sins of all the world and must atone for them with His death. How very insignificant, therefore, the agony of all other men! The sins committed by the whole world, from the first man, Adam, to the judgment-day, are placed upon that one man who was born of the Virgin Mary, while our burden is so very trifling in comparison, and we still break down under it.

But what is this sorrow, anguish and trembling of the Lord to teach us? What benefit are we to derive from His fear and lamentation, and from His public confession that His heart is so filled with misery that He would rather not live? It was stated above that His being terrified at death should teach us that He is a true, natural man, possessing flesh and blood like ours, and that He is altogether of like mind with us, but without sin. For it is an innate quality of our human nature to shudder at the thought of death. But it is impossible that any other mortal should be moved with fear as great as that of the Lord Jesus, because upon Him rests the iniquity of all mankind, and because for this iniquity He must suffer the death which is merited by the sins of the whole human family. This, together with the fact that He really did bear this excessively great burden without succumbing or perishing under it, proves most forcibly that He is also God, and more than a man.

Therefore is this death-struggle a powerful weapon which we wield against the heretics, who teach that Christ was not true God and true man. For we are compelled to confess that both natures of Christ here show themselves mightily; that, while His sorrow and fear and His wrestling with death are a potent declaration of His true, natural humanity, His divine power is proclaimed by His

submission to the will of God, and by His conquering that agony which would have overpowered all men and all creatures.

But this conflict with death, besides being useful for doctrine and the strengthening of our faith, can be profitably employed by us in two other ways. Sin has so blinded and corrupted us poor mortals that we cannot sufficiently discern our own imperfections, else we would diligently guard against transgressions; for we perceive in ourselves and others that we regard sin as but a trifling injury, yea, more, that we delight in it. He who becomes enslaved to pernicious avarice does not hesitate to take twelve or fourteen per cent., and would think himself very prosperous if he could obtain a great amount of such usury. Just so it is with him whom Satan makes a slave to debauchery; such a one regards himself most fortunate when he can satisfy his sensual desire, and the gratification of his evil passions is his only ambition. This is the case too with other sins; we rejoice over our imagined success in committing them. All this misery originates in our not knowing what a dreadful calamity sin really is. If we could only comprehend the wrath of God which is revealed against sin, and His judgment which awaits it, we would no longer desire and love sin, but would fear it and flee from it as though it were sudden death.

This picture of our dear Lord's agony at the mount of Olives serves to furnish us with such knowledge and fear. For if we look carefully on this picture we shall behold an image of sin, at sight of which our hearts must recoil with horror. Only look earnestly at the person pictured here! He is the Son of God, — the everlasting Righteousness! And although He assumed our flesh and blood, His flesh and blood is altogether sinless. Yet, since He took upon Himself foreign sin, namely that of all the world, in order to atone for it, this sin of others so affected Him, filled Him with such grief and anguish, and so terrified Him,

that He began to tremble and quake, confessing: "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death."

Now if the sins of others are able to inflict such agony upon this pious, innocent heart, what must not be the result if our own sins assail our naturally sinful and corrupt hearts, which are inclined to despair! God sometimes gives us instances of this result, that we may be influenced by terror; instances, in which sin rages in the soul to such a degree, that the poor miserable wretches destroy their own lives in order to be quickly released from such rackings of conscience. This is a certain sign that such sufferings of conscience are more grievous and intolerable than bodily death, notwithstanding that the latter is most violently opposed to our nature; for these wretched persons regard death as the means by which they can rid themselves of such sufferings. But it is a fatal means; for it is against that commandment of God which tells us, "thou shalt not kill." These people, therefore, only make themselves more worthy of God's wrath and of damnation. The proper means, by which we can with certainty get rid of this anguish, we shall consider hereafter.

Therefore, let us study this picture thoroughly, and not forget how our blessed Lord Jesus mourned and trembled at the mount of Olives. We should remember this especially when we are tempted by the devil, our own flesh and blood, or the wicked world, and when we perceive our great propensity to sin. Then let us reason thus: if sin is so mighty that it can affect Jesus Christ, my Lord and God, with the greatest grief, though it be not His own sin, but entirely that of others; how much more will it not tempt, grieve, terrify and oppress me, who am myself guilty of every sin to which I consented, and who can, at any rate, only with the greatest effort resist the fear of death and of the anger and judgment of God! Therefore, get thee hence, Satan, I will not follow thee! Thou makest it easy for me to sin, as though sin were a

trifling matter; but in my Lord Jesus I perceive that it is the most intolerable burden, because it so agitated His innocent heart. Therefore this narrative is of great value to us as an admonition to live in the fear of God and to sin no more. And most certain is it, if we bear this picture in mind, and, in accordance with it, persevere in prayer against temptation, that God will mercifully assist us by His Holy Spirit, so that Satan must flee and our flesh be kept under restraint; while they who do not keep this picture in view are led and driven like haltered cattle whithersoever the devil will.

Especially does the prayer Christ offered here serve as such an admonition. These were His words: "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." Now it is evident that this was not possible; for it was necessary that He should offer up His body for the sins of the whole world, and die upon the cross. But what else is to be interred from this, than that sin is such a great and terrible transgression that it was impossible for any creature to afford the least relief from its curse? But if we were to be delivered from this, it was necessary for the eternal Son of God to become man and to suffer death upon the cross for our sins; thus only could we become free from sin.

Therefore, again from this should we learn to know and judge sin correctly. If we desire to obey our own hearts and the devil, and to follow the example even of the world, it will be very easy for us to commit adultery and fornication, and to seek to profit by covetousness, by the practice of usury, and by extortion. We see this in the case of those who fall into such temptations that they can never get enough of sinning. O, do not serve your own heart, Satan and the world; let not the smooth fur deceive you, for it surely covers sharp, poisonous claws, and should these seize you it is all over with you, unless God succor you in an extraordinary way! For if sin could, in the manner we have related, assail and terrify Christ, who never was guilty of a single sin, what will

become of you and me, whom sin has, at any rate, previously so corrupted that we can not do otherwise than fear, tremble and despair and fly from God, as did Adam and Eve in Paradise! Therefore, let us be on our guard, and not run wantonly into such danger. Let us ask God for His Holy Spirit, that He may assist us, — that we may by His help defend ourselves against sin. If we do this, we shall be indeed the better for the scene at the mount of Olives.

Let us proceed. Even as this scene has been employed by us as an admonition to fear God and to guard against sin, so does it serve, in the second place, for our consolation. No man is able so carefully to govern himself that his flesh and Satan will not succeed sometimes to mislead him with their clamor, so that he makes a mistake and falls into sin. And Satan incessantly prowls around the Christian for the special purpose of leading him into public offenses, as we can see in the case of illustrious saints. How deeply David fell! And Peter the same! Now if this should happen to us also, and Satan should then come and harass our hearts by his representations of our sin, then we should again behold this picture of the mount of Olives, and turn our thoughts inward and say: O God, why is it that Jesus Christ, my Lord, Thy Son, trembles so? What is it that troubles Him? He prays that the cup might pass from Him. What is this cup? It is the bitter death upon the cross and nothing else. But why does He suffer this death, being without sin, holy and righteous? Alas, this is brought about by the sin of the world, which God has placed upon Him; this it is that oppresses and alarms Him!

But how must I apply this? what must I contemplate here? This will I consider here, and believe that it is true: if God has placed my sin upon Him, then am I most certainly released from, sin; and because this is so, John the Baptist calls Him "The Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." "What accusation could I

now bring against myself and my dear Lord Jesus? True, I am a sinner; I experience, alas! that my sins alarm me and that they always try to make me sad; I am afraid of God and His severe judgment. Nevertheless, of what could I accuse myself; and how could I censure my dear Lord Jesus? He trembles at the mount of Olives, and feels such anguish that His sweat is as it were great drops of blood; my sins, which He has taken upon Himself, and whose heavy burden He has borne, have brought Him to this. Therefore, I shall leave them there, and firmly hope that when I shall appear before God and His judgment, God shall find no sin in me. Not as though I were pious and had committed no sin, but that God Himself has taken away from me my iniquity and laid it on His Son. Isa. 53.

Thus the scene at the mount of Olives also serves for our consolation; it assures us that Christ has taken our sins upon Himself and rendered satisfaction for them. For how could we otherwise account for such fear and trembling? If our sins, therefore, rest upon Christ, we can be content; they are in the right place, — just where they belong. Upon us they do not lie well; for we and all men, yea and all creatures, are too weak to bear a single sin: it would crush us with its weight. Therefore, let them remain upon Christ, and see what happens Him on their account. He takes them to the cross with Him and even dies in consequence of them; but on the third day He appears as the Lord of sin, death and the devil; for they attacked Him with all their powers, but accomplished nothing. Now this should be our comfort, and we should thank God for the unspeakable grace, by which He removed from us the heavy burden which would have hurled us into the abyss of hell, and placed it upon His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who, although He was sinless and God eternal, still toiled and drudged under it at the mount of Olives, until the bloody sweat flowed gently from Him. To this comfort let us cleave,

and not permit sadness to oppress our hearts, but say: it is sufficient that my Lord Jesus mourned and trembled so; my lamentations can accomplish nothing. But if I make His agony my comfort, and on it base my hopes in life and death, then has He so labored for me with His griefs and fears that I must in future be joyful in Him and of good cheer, and not fear sin and death, but hope for God's grace and eternal life. Such exercise of faith and comfort in Christ is the true worship of God, pleasing unto Him; and since this exercise is the only means, by which we can worship God truly, poor, troubled consciences should make use of it whenever the burden of sin tortures and alarms the heart. Otherwise it is impossible to find any true, certain consolation in such misery

But this history of the scene at the mount of Olives is also of use to us in teaching us, by Christ's example, how to conduct ourselves in times of fear, temptation and distress. The hour was now at hand when Judas should betray, the Jews capture, and the Gentiles crucify Christ. What does He do? He is "exceeding sorrowful" and full of fear. But this is not all. "He went a little further, and fell on His face, and prayed." We too must learn this; we dare not let trouble so affect us that we forget to pray. For it is also a necessary part of divine worship and pleasing to God, not to despair in anguish and distress, but, when these attack us, to lift up our hearts to Him, and seek His help. The 91. Psalm testifies to this, where God says: "He shall call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honor him." But this is very difficult for us; for we imagine, when God suffers anxiety and distress to come upon us, that He is angry with us and is our enemy; and, therefore, even if we do pray, we think that our prayers are vain and useless. But against this we can employ the comfort of Christ's agony, and thus drive back such thoughts. For if God were always angry when He suffers pains and distresses to come

upon us, it would follow that He was angry with His dear Son. But the reverse is the case, as Solomon also says, namely, that the father scourgeth every son whom he receiveth, and whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth. Therefore, let no such thoughts deceive us; let us not regard God as an enemy because He permits us to suffer. We see here that He does not exempt His only begotten Son from suffering, but permits Him to feel sin and the agony of death, and to fear and tremble on their account. We should believe that God deals with us in the same way; that we are His children and that He desires to remain our Father, notwithstanding that He lets us suffer a little. For why would we be spared all those things, from which He did not exempt even His Only Begotten, whom He permitted to suffer that agony for us which we would have had to suffer forever in hell? Therefore, let us still follow Christ, and as we endure fear and distress with Him, even so let us learn to pray with Him, and doubt not that God will graciously hear our prayers!

And how did Christ pray? The prayer itself is a very useful and necessary pattern, which we should imitate, and never leave out of sight. He prays: "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt." This petition He repeats three times, until finally, as Luke says, "there appeared an angel unto Him from heaven, strengthening Him."

Now this is the model prayer which we too should use in temptation and trouble. "O my Father," He prays, as though He would say: although my present anguish and alarm are so great that they make me exceeding sorrowful, even unto death, and that I see nothing before me but Thy terrible wrath, and death; still I do not doubt that Thou art my Father, that Thou dost love me, that Thou dost behold me and care for me. Therefore, I hope to be released from this agony. "If it be

possible, let this cup pass from me;" that is, help me, and save me from these sufferings.

Even as Christ calls upon God, His Father, so must we also do. For, although He alone is the eternal Son of God, according to the 2. Psalm: "Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten Thee," yet we too are children and heirs of God by faith in Christ Jesus. We should, therefore, not merely utter these words in our prayers, but be fully confident that God, as our Father, desires our welfare, and will not forsake us, His children. For where such trust is wanting, there can be no sincere prayer, and there surely the thought is entertained that God is not our Father, that He does not want us, and that He is not concerned about us. But this is dishonoring God and robbing Him of His right name, "Father."

But let us learn still another lesson. Our dear Lord Jesus prays that His Father would let this cup pass from Him, and, as the true only begotten Son, He expects everything good of His Father. Yet He adds these words: "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt." Let us do the same. Let us not on account of temptation and affliction think that God is angry with us; but turn to Him as the child turns to its father; for, because we believe in Christ, God will accept us as sons and as joint heirs with Christ; and let us call upon Him for help, saying: O blessed heavenly Father, see how hard it goes with me in this or that respect, — help, for the sake of Thy dear Son, Jesus Christ, — suffer me not to remain in this distress or to sink under it, and so on. With this God is well pleased. And it is His desire that we all, in every need, have such confidence in Him, in and through Christ; that we, firmly relying upon Him as our dear Father, call upon Him; and that we do not doubt at all that He, for Christ's sake, will not only be merciful to us as His dear children, but also heartily sympathize with us and therefore willingly help us. Still we must humble ourselves, and not insist upon having our will, but submit it

to the will of God whether we shall still continue in misery; and, if this is His will, show our obedience by patiently bearing such a delay of deliverance, as we can see that Christ here did.

But the question might here occur to us: why does Christ here pray thus, while in His prayer in the 17. chap, of John He does not use a single word which implies that He commits the decision, whether He shall obtain His request or not, to the will of God? There He says: "Father, the hour is come; glorify Thy Son. O Father, glorify Thou me. Keep through Thine own name those whom Thou hast given me. I pray that Thou shouldest keep them from the evil. Sanctify them through Thy truth." Also: "Father, I will that they also, whom Thou hast given me, be with me where I am," &c. This entire prayer shows that He will have His request granted and not denied. But why does He not pray in the same way here? Answer: the want, for which the Lord prays here, is a temporal, bodily want. Now we must, in all things pertaining to this bodily life, submit our will to that of God; for, as Paul says, "we know not what we should pray for." It is, besides, often necessary for us that God should leave us under the cross and in distress. Since God alone knows what is good for us, we should prefer His will and renounce our own, rendering obedience with patience.

When, however, bodily affairs are not the subject of our prayer, but eternal blessings, God's will is manifest and unalterable; it is His will that all men should be saved, that they should acknowledge their sin and believe in its forgiveness through Christ. Such eternal blessings we receive when God pardons our iniquity, upholds us by His Word, sanctifies us, and gives us the Holy Spirit and everlasting life; and such blessings as these it is that Christ implores for the Christian Church in John 17. Therefore, when praying for such heavenly, eternal gifts, it is not necessary to commit it to God's will, whether He will hear us or not. We

should know that He will give us these things willingly and most certainly; for we have His Word which declares to us His will in this respect. "God so loved the world," Christ tells us, "that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Behold, here we have God's will with reference to our salvation. Boldly, therefore, let us pray in accordance with this will, just as Christ, John 17., prays: "Father, I will that they be where I am!" Be this also our prayer: Father, I pray and I will have it so, that Thou forgive my sins for the sake of Thy Son, Jesus Christ, who has expiated their guilt, having made an atonement for them by His death!

In this way, however, we cannot perceive God's will in regard to bodily temptation and distress. "We do not know whether it would contribute to our salvation and to the honor of God, if He should, according to our desire, quickly release us from sickness, poverty or other troubles. We should, therefore, pray for help indeed; but submit it to the will of God whether we shall be helped soon or shall continue in our affliction. And should God not relieve us immediately, and in the manner we wish, our prayer shall still not be useless, but God shall strengthen our hearts and impart to us grace and patience, so that we can bear our affliction and triumph in the end. The example here of Christ proves this; God, His Father, would not let the cup pass from Him; still He sent Him an angel who strengthened Him. So it shall be with us too, even if God should delay or refuse His help. But in regard to spiritual wants we are certain of being heard: God will, for Christ's sake, cheerfully forgive our sins and save our souls; therefore, we can pray for this with sure confidence, and it were a sin to doubt it.

This is the third lesson, about prayer in temptation. But we are very slow at learning it, as the example before us of the disciples plainly shows. Temptation was in store for them too, and,

therefore, the Lord admonishes them to pray, so that they might not enter into temptation. For in such a case prayer is the only and the best preventive and remedy. But the flesh is so weak and sluggish, that when the danger is greatest and prayers are most needed we slumber and sleep; that is, anguish overtakes us and molests us so severely, that we think all opposition is vain and useless. Temptation or the fall is the result of this, as it was in the case of the disciples. But our gracious and compassionate God, who has promised us assistance and mercy through His Son Jesus Christ, pardons this weakness and rescues us from temptation, if we heed His admonition, again to seek consolation and help with Him.

This, then, is the history of the agony at the mount of Olives, which should be diligently considered and properly applied. This is done when we, in the first place, learn from it how very heavy a burden sin must be, since it so oppressed

and tortured the Son of God that He trembled, and that great drops of blood fell from Him to the ground, and when we, therefore, look well to ourselves and flee from sin.

This is done when we, secondly, draw consolation from this history in those times of distress and temptation which cannot fail to come upon us too; . we see how the Son of God bore our sins.

We make the right use of this history when we, in the third place, continue instant in prayer, in every temptation, according to Christ's command: "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation."

He who thus employs the occurrences at the mount of Olives, shall remain in the fear of God and in true faith, and shall find comfort and deliverance in all manner of dangers and temptations. May our blessed Lord Jesus grant this to us all through His Holy Spirit. Amen.