

Tenth Passion Sermon

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**Christ Nailed To The Cross.—His Deeds, Sufferings And Words On The Cross.**

**Martin Luther, "Tenth 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. 196-212.***

**Matt 27, 33-56.**

And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha, that is to say, a place of a skull, they gave Him vinegar to drink mingled with gall: and when He had tasted thereof, He would not drink. And they crucified Him, and parted His garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots. And sitting down they watched Him there; and set up over His head His accusation written, This is Jesus the King of the Jews. Then were there two thieves crucified with Him; one on the right hand, and another on the left. And they that passed by reviled Him, wagging their heads, and saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save Thyself. If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross. Likewise also the chief priests mocking Him, with the scribes and elders, said, He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He be the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now, if He will have Him: for He said, I am the Son of God. The thieves also, which were crucified with Him, cast the same in His teeth. Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me? Some of them that stood there, when they heard that, said, This man calleth for Elias. And straightway one of them ran, and took a sponge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave Him to drink. The rest said, Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save Him. Jesus, when He had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost. And, behold, the vail of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and came out of the graves after His resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many. Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God. And many women were there beholding afar off, which followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering unto Him: among which was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's children.

**E**ach of the four Evangelists makes a record of the things that occurred on the cross. Still, sometimes one of them mentions a thing that the rest of them omit. Before treating, therefore, on the true

doctrine taught in our text, we propose to recite the history of the cross in its details as furnished by all four Evangelists.

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When the soldiers had brought the Lord Jesus to Golgotha, the place for executing public malefactors, "they gave Him," as Matthew relates, "vinegar to drink mingled with gall." This gall was not the gall of a live beast, but a compound of all sorts of bitter herbs. This drink, as some suppose, was given to dying criminals, to hasten their departure. But the Lord would not drink of it, for He had willingly yielded to this death. The word gall is used in this sense in Deut. 29, Ps. 69, Jer. 8, and in other places. Immediately after this, the soldiers nailed Him to the cross and two malefactors with Him, one on His right and one on His left. The Lord Jesus, however, as the true priest who must now attend to His priestly office, prayed for those who crucified Him and for all poor sinners, saying: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." We shall have occasion to see the fruit of this prayer when we come to speak of the malefactor on the right of Christ; for to him it was that Gospel and sermon, from which he learned to know Christ as the Son of God, that He hanged upon the cross as the atonement for the sins of the whole world, and that after His bodily death He would live and reign with God, His Father, in eternity.

The Evangelists announce that Pilate placed the superscription. "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews," written in three languages, over the head of the Lord Jesus. It was customary to do this, so that every one might know why people were executed, and take warning. The superscription over the head of the Lord Jesus was to serve the special purpose of admonishing the Jews, even while He was hanging miserably on the cross, not to be offended in Him, but to take Him for their King. But it was in vain! The title made them so indignant that they accosted Pilate thus: "Write not, The King of the Jews; but that He said, I am the King of the Jews." But Pilate was much displeased with them and would not alter the superscription, which remains an eternal testimony against the Jews, that they could not rest until they had crucified their King.

Hereupon the soldiers, four in number, took the Lord Jesus' garments, separating them into four parts. His coat, however, which was without seam, being woven, they did not rend, but cast lots for it. And John says that this had been prophesied in the Scriptures. He would have us understand by this that the taking of the Lord's garments was no accident, but done by God's special counsel, that it might serve the Church as an emblem; for it shows, first, that the world is not satisfied even when it has put Christians to death, but takes what little property Christians may have and plunders them. This we can see in our old histories, where Julian and other blood-hounds and tyrants drove poor Christians away from their possessions and took from them what they had. We see it not there only, but we have living instances of tyrants and bishops who are well enough pleased when their subjects, contrary to their command, eat meat, hear Lutheran (as they call them) sermons, receive both bread and wine in the Sacrament, and the like; for then they have plausible reasons to oppress their subjects, to sell or trespass upon their property, or to tax them as they please. But we can also see how much richer such money makes them. Money thus unrighteously extorted devours all they have, so that afterward they are neither blest nor prosperous.

The soldiers' casting lots upon the vesture of the Lord can, no doubt, be applied to sects and heretics. The Holy Scriptures is the coat which our Lord Jesus puts on, and in which He can be seen and found. This coat is woven throughout, and all its threads are so interlocked that it cannot be cut nor divided. But the soldiers who crucify Christ, that is, heretics and sects, interest themselves in this coat. Their chief fault is that they want the whole coat, that is, that they try to convince every one that all Scripture harmonizes with them and their opinions. The [sic] Sacramentarians of our day serve as an illustration. They regard the words, "This is my body," "This is my blood," as insignificant, saying that they are only a single passage, while the Bible, as they boast, is

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full of passages which prove Christ to be no longer on earth, but in heaven.

The manner of all sects is to adopt a special opinion without consulting the Word; this opinion then hangs continually before their eyes, like blue glasses, and everything they see is blue, that is, according to their own opinion. But they are knaves, as St. Paul calls them, Eph. 4, where he admonishes us to be no more "carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive." The Greek word here translated "sleight" is *kybia*, which means, in English, playing at dice, or trickery. Now, as the knave masters the die so that it must fall to suit him, so sects and fanatics master the Word. Every one wants the whole of it, and makes use of the die. But let us proceed with the history.

As the Lord was hanging on the cross He saw His mother and His mother's sister and John with them, and "He saith unto His mother, Woman, behold thy Son! Then saith He to the disciple, Behold thy mother!"

After this, men of every station began the most heartless scoffing. The chief priests, scribes and elders, as Matthew writes, said, "He saved others; let Him save Himself, if He be Christ, the chosen of God." With such pointed, poisonous words they wished not only to insult the Lord, but also to alienate from Him the people, so that they would not respect Him, so that they would slight and despise all the miracles they had seen and all the sermons they had heard, and so that they would regard Him as a blasphemer. The soldiers, who as Gentiles cared not about God, mocked Him in a different way, giving Him vinegar to drink, "and saying, If Thou be the King of the Jews, save Thyself."

Finally, even one of the malefactors "railed on Him, saying, If Thou be Christ, save Thyself and us." But the other rebuked him for this, saying: And dost even thou not fear God? There thou hangest and in less than an hour or

two all will be over with thee. Thou hast all thy life been a scoundrel, like myself, and hast well deserved this punishment. Is it not high time to think of thy salvation and to leave such foolish words unspoken? After giving this reproof he turned to the Lord and said, "Remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom." And Jesus answered, "Verily, I say unto thee, To-day shalt thou be with me in paradise."

In the mean time came deep darkness, most unnatural and terrible. The agony of death pressed from the Lord the cry: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" The Jews well enough understood the meaning of this cry; still their bitterness and their fierceness urged them to pervert Christ's word and say: "This man calleth for Elias. .... Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save Him!"

"Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst." Then the soldiers took a sponge filled "with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to His mouth. When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, He said, It is finished." By these words He meant to say: The world and the devil have now done all that lies in their power, and therefore I have now done all that the redemption of mankind demands, and all that the Prophets have foretold in Holy Writ; the work is done! Then He "cried with a loud voice, .... Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit; and having said thus, He gave up the ghost."

Immediately after, "the vail of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom," as a testimony that the proper offering had been made to God at last, and that now the law and its sacrifices, which were merely a type of the sacrifice just made, were forever abrogated. The temple was so constructed that the people stood to hear the Word of God and to sing and pray in the apartment nearest the entrance. This was separated from another apartment, which was similar to the

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chancels in some of our churches, into which were admitted only the priests, who there offered sacrifices and did the other things belonging to the service of God, and which, because none except the holy priests dared enter there, was called the holy place. Beyond this was still another apartment, called the holy of holies, in which stood the mercy-seat. This was separated from the holy place by means of a vail, beyond which no one was allowed to go except the high priest, and he only once every year, when he offered for his sins and for the sins of all the people. It is this vail that the Evangelists tell us was rent. They mention this to testify to us that God's services, as they were conducted in the holy of holies, are ended and abolished, and this because the highest priest, God's Son, has offered now unto God, His Father, for the sins of the whole world, not the blood of goats and calves, but His own body and blood.

This rending of the vail took place while the earth quaked so violently that the rocks rent and that the graves of numerous saints were opened. Out of these graves, after the resurrection of Christ, arose many bodies of the saints, who appeared unto many in Jerusalem, who preached concerning the Lord Jesus and who testified that He was Christ, the true Messiah. These ascended to heaven with the Lord Jesus to live there forever, like Enoch and Elias, whom God took into heaven alive, the former before the flood and the latter three thousand years after the creation of the world. God desired to preserve to His Church in every age a sure testimony of the resurrection from the dead. The number was greater, however, in the case before us than it had ever been in any other case.

Now when the centurion, who had to remain at the cross, and others, saw the earthquake and the other unusual "things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God." "And all the people that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts, and returned."

All this, according to the Evangelists, took place at the cross before Christ expired. But we cannot consider the whole of it in one sermon. For the present, therefore, we shall confine ourselves to two points. First, why the Evangelists quote more Scripture when they give the history of the passion than on any other subject. Secondly, why God destined His Son to die upon the cross.

The Evangelists cite so many Scripture passages for every part of the history of Christ's sufferings, in order to combat the offence occasioned at sight of these sufferings, which must have sorely tried the disciples in particular. Not only the unbelieving' Jews, but even the disciples of Jesus were offended at Christ's dying such a miserable and ignominious death. Both the Jews and the disciples thought that if this were Christ He would surely build up again the poor, oppressed and ruined kingdom. Why, even after Christ's resurrection the disciples continued to think in this way, for they lamented that the Lord was about to ascend to heaven and depart from the earth, and at the mount of Olives they asked Him, "Lord, wilt Thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?"

When the Lord had now fallen into the hands of His enemies and had suffered Himself to be slain on the cross, all the hopes which the disciples had entertained for His glory vanished. The two disciples who went to Emmaus freely confessed this, saying: "We trusted that it had been He which should have redeemed Israel," as if they would say: It is all over now; we hoped for things different from those which we have realized. The Jews were offended still more seriously; for, because the Lord was dying so shamefully and would not save Himself, they regarded Him, in spite of His miracles and sermons, as an impostor, and tauntingly demanded that He should come down from the cross if He were the Son of God, so that they might believe in Him. The Jews hated Jesus, the disciples loved Him; the Jews rejoiced in His misfortune, the disciples were saddened and discouraged by it. Notwithstanding that they

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were thus differently disposed toward Christ, they all, both disciples and Jews, thought that it was all over with Him now and that He was not the true Messiah.

But how must we account for this opinion and for such offence? Simply thus: they left the Scriptures out of sight and had not diligently studied the Prophets. For it is written in the Prophets, Isa. 53, that the Messiah must suffer and die. The Scriptures, Isa. 58, declare that He should be "numbered with the transgressors." In the 41. Ps. and in the 11. chap, of Zech. we are told that His "own familiar friend" should betray Him and sell Him for "thirty pieces of silver." The 22. Ps. plainly tells us that the soldiers should part His garments among them, and cast lots upon His vesture, while the 69. declares that when He shall thirst in His agony upon the cross they shall give Him vinegar to drink. It had been prophesied that there should not a bone of Him be broken and that a spear should pierce His side, Ex. 12, Zech. 12, &c. Now, if the disciples and the Jews had carefully studied the writings of the Prophets, instead of finding cause for offence in Christ's sufferings and scandalous death, they would have found comfort therein. If they had studied the Scriptures, the fact that it came to pass just as the Holy Spirit, who cannot lie nor err, through the Prophets and in the Psalms, had predicted concerning Christ, would have led them to the firm conclusion that this was the Messiah indeed. But they gave no heed to the Scriptures, and therefore could not resist the offence which, like a flood, swept them away, so that they entirely lost Christ.

The Apostles personally experienced the disadvantage of departing from the Scriptures and not following them, and therefore continually quote the Scriptures as they write the history of the passion. By so doing they would say: It seems ridiculous that the crucified Jesus, who hangs there so miserably upon the cross, and who was treated so unmercifully and with such excessive wantonness by the soldiers, should be the Son of God and the true Messiah. But let us not be offen-

ded in Him! If we notice what the Holy Spirit had predicted long before through the Prophets concerning the Messiah, we shall find that this Jesus is the true Messiah, and that He bore what had been appointed for the Messiah to bear. It is most certainly true that if we do not hold to the Word we shall not be able to defend ourselves against the least offence. We are lost unless we take refuge in the Word.

Every one should, for this reason, flee, as if the devil himself were in pursuit, from sects and fanatics, ... who try to substitute human notions for the written Word. If we yield to such as these, we step, as it were, from the rock into the quicksand, where, the more we try to gain a foot-hold, the more we sink, and where it is impossible to save ourselves. God's Word alone is the true and enduring rock that affords a sure foundation. Let him, therefore, who would walk in the right way, see that he has God's Word. When Christ says, "This is my body," "this is my blood," let him believe and not follow the deceivers who say, It is mere bread, it is mere wine. When Christ says, "He that believeth on me shall never see death," let him believe it .... Then he may be sure that he is right, and that he has escaped the offence.

We now propose briefly to consider also the second point, viz.: why it was decreed in God's especial counsel that God's Son, our Lord and Saviour, should die just as He did; for the Jews held the death upon the cross as the most offensive and disgraceful, and as far more detestable than we hold the death upon the gallows or the wheel. We find the reason for this written Dent. 21: "And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be to be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day; (for he that is hanged is accursed of God;) that thy land be not denied, which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance."

Now, it is indifferent whether God pronounces this severe judgment upon those hanged

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in view of the future calamity that His Son Himself should be thus slain, or in view of the past calamity that disobedient man fell in Paradise and ate of the forbidden fruit. The chief and most important consideration here is, that we should learn and remember well that God calls all those accursed who die on the tree. For from this it immediately follows that, since Christ also died on a tree, He too became a curse and was called accursed. Hence the devil and the world took particular delight in bringing upon Him that very death which God Himself had called accursed. Paul, however, teaches us how we must understand this passage in Deut., and whether its contents ought to be a subject for joy or for offence; for in speaking of it he says, Gal. 3:

"Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us; for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree; that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith."

We should, by all means, consider this passage carefully. Paul very nicely brings the two little words, "curse" and "blessing," side by side, and leads us back to the promise made to Abraham when God said, "In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." For it follows that, if in Abraham's seed all the nations of the earth were to be blessed, all the nations of the earth must have been under the curse; else they would not have needed a promise of blessing. Again, this seed, in which the blessing was to come, must have been that only blessed seed, with which God is not wroth, but which He accompanies with pure grace and blessing. It is plain, however, who this seed of Abraham is; namely, Jesus Christ, born of the virgin Mary, the Only Begotten of the Father, and the only one full of grace and truth. All others, counting from Adam to the very last man, are not children of grace by nature, but God is angry with them and hostile to them, and they are not blessed, but cursed. And why? Because they all are sinners.

But behold the result! The blessed seed of Abraham is nailed to that tree, or cross, to which God refers when He says, "Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree;" and it is therefore no longer called the blessed seed, but the accursed. Paul comes out boldly with this, saying, Christ was "made a curse." Let us hear the reason for this.

It is we who, on account of our sins, are a curse, and under the wrath of God. Christ, the only begotten Son of God, is full of grace and truth. How, then, does He come to be nailed to the tree? Why does He thrust Himself under the wrath of God? It was for our sake, Paul tells us; "He was made a curse for us;" He desired to bear God's wrath and atone for our sins, that we might be made blessed, that is, receive the Holy Spirit, be freed from sin, and become the children of God. This may be illustrated by the case of a poor beggar who has many debts, but is unable to pay them; another man, who is able to pay these debts, comes to his assistance, becomes his surety, thus making himself a debtor, and pays the poor man's debts. Paul expresses this very nicely, Rom. 8: "The law could not" deliver us from sin and death, and so God Himself helped us. He sent "His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh," that is, His Son became man, assuming our flesh and blood. And God "for sin, condemned sin in the flesh," that is, God has made us free from sin through His only begotten Son, who became a sin-offering and had to atone for sin, thus bringing the blessing of Abraham upon us who were under the curse. In 2 Cor. 5, Paul himself interprets this latter: God "hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him."

Christ, therefore, became both "a curse," and afterward also "sin," that is, a sin-offering, upon which rest the sins of all men, and hence also the wrath of God and a miserable death. Since these things rest upon this offering, we are relieved, for they rest on us no longer. This is the reason why John the Baptist calls Him a Lamb,

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meaning a sheep for the slaughter, a Sacrifice, appointed by God to take away the sins of the whole world. And the Lord Himself says, John 12: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." And again, John 3: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Paul says that he did not know anything and was "determined not to know anything," "save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." Christ was crucified so that He might sanctify, deliver and justify us, who, had we been left to ourselves, would have eternally remained and perished under sin and death, and under the tyranny of Satan.

And should we now be offended at the cross? Was it, after all, an ignominious death? We should heartily thank God that His Son hangs upon the cross, bearing the curse under which we should still be on account of our sins. There He hangs as one condemned, and as one whom God hates and visits now with shame and want and agony. This is so, Paul says, for thy sake and for my sake, that the blessing might come on us. For if the curse had continued to rest on us, we would never have received the blessing. But lo, the blessed Seed draws near and takes the curse, which rests on us, upon Himself, and the blessing, which rests on Him, He gives to us. Since He would and should become a curse for us, no other death except this death on the cross was suitable, for this is the death which God's Word had declared accursed.

Let us, then, thoroughly learn here to judge, not according to what the eye perceives, but according to what the Word of God declares. According to appearances the Lord Jesus' death is a shameful death and, as God Himself calls it, an accursed death; and the tree on which He dies, an execrable tree, — a cursed cross, and this because all our sins hang on it. For sin and the curse, or God's anger, and every misfortune, — all these

belong together. Therefore Isaiah says: "Many were astonished at Thee; His visage was so marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men." Again: "When we shall see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from Him; He was despised, and we esteemed Him not." This is the way these things appear, and it is impossible for human reason to see them in a different light, because God calls every one accursed who dies on a tree. The cross is cursed; He who hangs on it is cursed; the cause of His hanging there is also cursed, for sin demands the curse; and the greater the number of sins that lie on the Lord Jesus, the greater also the curse.

But let us look a little further and find what follows from this that Christ, the blessed Seed, dies such an accursed death and becomes a curse for us Himself. Paul, in very appropriate words, states this as the result: "That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles," and that thus "we might receive the Holy Spirit." This we find to be altogether different from that which we can see with the bodily eye. This disgraceful death which God has cursed is an offence to the eye, but to us it is a blessed death, for it takes the curse away from us and brings God's blessing to us. The tree which in itself is an accursed tree, is for us a blissful tree. It is that precious altar, upon which God's Son offers Himself to God, His Father, for our sins. It is that glorious altar, at which He appears as the true and eternal priest. For He is brought to the tree, and He makes it a blessed altar, that we might be released from sin, and receive God's grace and be God's children.

No wonder, then, that the old teachers entertained such excellent thoughts about the cross and the accursed tree. There in Paradise, they say, a beautiful tree occasioned our falling into sin and death; here, however, an old, dry, yes accursed tree occasioned our deliverance from sin and our receiving everlasting life. Here hangs God's Son

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with arms extended as a testimony that He will cast no one out, but gladly receive every one and draw all unto Him, as He says He will, John 12. His head is lifted toward heaven, pointing out to us the way of life eternal. His feet reach toward the ground where they braise the head of Satan, that old serpent creeping on the earth, forcing from him all his power. That power over us which Satan received because of our sins he surely loses now, in virtue of the dear Lord Jesus' hanging on

the cross, where He atones for our sins with His death and becomes a curse in our stead.

Therefore, let us here learn to acknowledge and to praise our merciful heavenly Father's gracious will toward us. For He spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up to die, yea, to die upon the cross, and suffered Him to be made a curse; so that we might obtain the blessing, be set free from sin, receive the Holy Spirit, and through Him become God's children and be eternally saved. God grant this to us all. Amen.