

## Thirteenth Passion Sermon

# Thirteenth Passion Sermon

**Christ's Body Taken Down From The Cross And Laid In A Tomb.—The Soldiers Guard The Tomb.**

**Martin Luther, "Thirteenth 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. 250-264.***

**Matt. 27, 57-66.**

When the even was come, there came a rich man of Arimathea, named Joseph, who also himself was Jesus disciple: he went to Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be delivered. And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out. in the rock: and he rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed. And there was Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary, sitting over against the sepulchre. Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate, saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while He was yet alive, After three days I will rise again. Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night, and steal Him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first. Pilate said unto them, Ye have a watch: go your way, make it as sure as ye can. So they went, and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch.

The concluding events related in the history of the sufferings of our Lord Jesus are His removal from the cross, His being laid in a new tomb, and the guarding of the tomb by the soldiers. And a most appropriate conclusion this is; for it shows how the death of our dear Lord Jesus influences both His friends and His enemies. His enemies become uneasy and apprehensive, and they perceptibly sink deeper into sin. They, however, who honestly love the Lord Jesus, are made confident and bold by the death of Christ, notwithstanding their weakness and timidity, and now venture to do what before they would not have thought of doing. The death of our dear Lord Jesus has just the same effect on men in our day, as we shall soon hear.

The shameful death of Christ upon the cross was indeed a most severe offence. Hence His foes blaspheme Him to the utmost, while His disciples, who had been about Him, did not dare to show themselves, and had no other thought than that all was over with Him now. His mother, the dear Virgin Mary, stood there distressed and full of sorrow, and other women with her. Now, although she closely kept in her heart the saying of the angel, and pondered the prophecies spoken by pious and holy people, such as the aged Simeon and Anna, a prophetess, when Jesus was yet a child, Luke 2, her affliction still overwhelmed her so and the offence so wounded her heart, that she could not speak. Thus the small assembly that had hitherto adhered to Christ and kept Him company is perfectly mute. The con-

## Thirteenth Passion Sermon

demned malefactor is the only one who moves or speaks. Christ's enemies carry the day and are full of hope and gladness. The clamor made is all their own, the rest must hold their peace.

The weakness and timidity of these pious people serves, as said above, to teach us not to be rash and not to place too much reliance in ourselves. If these almost lose sight of comfort and are swallowed up, as it were, by grief and misery, how much more shall not we be subject to such weakness when called upon to expose ourselves or to suffer for the Gospel's sake. How very necessary, therefore, that we should abide in the fear of God and pray for the Holy Spirit, that He may enlighten and comfort our hearts, and make us bold enough to dare and to bear something for the glory of God and for the sake of His Word.

When the offence was at its very height, and when they who had been the best Christians and had fearlessly clung to the Lord Jesus began to falter and to shrink, and, on account of fear, sorrow and gloom, knew not what to do nor whither to go, the first to approach was Joseph of Arimathea, a city which is also called Arumah, Joshua 15 and Judges 9. Joseph was not a plain and common citizen, like the Apostles, who were simply common people, but he was a member of the council of Jerusalem and very rich. He it was who ventured to go to Pilate and beg for the dead body, that he might take it down from the cross and bury it. And then came also Nicodemus, who, although he loved the Lord and His Word, had been so timorous that he came to Him only by night. He brought about a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes, so that the Lord might not be buried meanly, but with honor. It was customary among the Jews, as John relates, because they had derived from the Word of God the hope of the resurrection and of everlasting life, to give the bodies of the deceased a decent burial by preparing them with myrrh and aloes, so that they would not only be preserved for a long time and decay

slowly, but also that they would have an agreeable odor.

Mark and Luke specially mention that Joseph was a disciple of Christ, that is, he attentively and approvingly heard Christ preach, and waited for the kingdom of God. We must carefully bear this in mind, for from this we learn what prompted him to have the boldness to go to Pilate, which was not a trifling matter.

The chief priests and the entire council at Jerusalem had accused the Lord Jesus as a perverter of the nation, as a deceiver and blasphemer, and on this accusation Pilate based his judgment. Now, Joseph, who had taken no part in any of the proceedings against the Lord Jesus and did not want to be present at His trial, did a very dangerous thing when he sought Christ's body for a decent burial. He was thus likely to incur the fury of the whole council and of Pilate himself, who had condemned the Lord, and he thus gave them to understand that in his opinion Christ had been a pious and a good Man, who had been wronged in the sight of God and the world.

What moved him so boldly to expose himself? Only this, he was waiting for the kingdom of God. That is, he still believed that God's kingdom would not fail to come, and that Christ, although He had so miserably hung and died upon the cross, would be raised from the dead by God, and that He would accomplish and furnish everything necessary to fulfill the prophecies concerning the Messiah and his kingdom. If the centurion who stood over against Him and saw Christ die when He had cried with a loud voice, learned so much from various occurrences, such as the darkness and the earthquake, that he openly confessed: "Truly this Man, was the Son of God," how much more would not this Joseph and pious Nicodemus also have had such thoughts! Without a doubt, the preaching of the prophets, and the words of Christ which they had repeatedly heard and which they had now, through the admonition of the Holy Spirit, taken to heart for the first time, conveyed

### Thirteenth Passion Sermon

to them the hope that Christ had not been finally disposed of, but that God would establish His kingdom now when men least looked for it. Christ had, for instance, preached to Nicodemus a powerful sermon on this hope, telling him, John 3, that as the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness so He also would be lifted up on the cross.

The Holy Spirit, at that time, kindled such thoughts in their weak and timid hearts, which soon influenced them so that Joseph goes to Pilate and asks for the body of Him whom Pilate had condemned as a disturber and blasphemer. Nicodemus brings myrrh and aloes, with which to give the Lord a costly and decent burial, as their testimony before all the world that they yet hoped that God's kingdom still would come, although defied by Jerusalem's haughtiest boast that Christ was gone and things would soon be changed.

Such is the fruit of our dear Lord Jesus' death. The weakest and most diffident distinguish themselves by boldly and fearlessly confessing Christ and by asking for His body, which hangs in the greatest disgrace, that they might bury it with the greatest honor. They thus testify that they, in spite of Jews, chief priests, Pilate, and all foes of Christ, regard and glorify Christ as the Son of God, hope for His kingdom, and find comfort in Him even now when He is dead and when every body thinks that He is gone forever. This is exactly as Mark and Luke say: Joseph "waited for the kingdom of God," that is, he hoped that God, through this Man, would found a new kingdom on the earth, forgive sins, and impart the Holy Spirit and eternal life. For, according to the prophets, the great, essential feature of God's kingdom is, that Christ, or the Messiah, must establish it.

Isaiah's prophecy concerning Christ, "A bruised reed shall He not break, and the smoking flax shall He not quench," is here fulfilled in the case of Joseph and Nicodemus. Hitherto they were weak and timid Christians. They suffered much from their fear, which prevented them from making an open confession. It is for this reason

that John speaks of Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night, as a secret disciple. Christ forgave them this fear, and did not cast them away on account of it. Now, however, when the danger is greatest and when they who usually were such strong and bold Christians are overcome by the offence, and fear to let themselves be seen, the Holy Spirit, through the death of Christ, fans the smoking and nearly smothered flax until it makes a blaze as bright as the beautiful sun. What Joseph had so far been thinking and believing of Christ in secret, he now makes known to all, fearing neither the Jews nor Pilate. He cares more for Christ, who died in the deepest disgrace, than for all the world. Let us not regard this as insignificant, or as a mere result of Christ's sufferings. These things are written as examples for us all, that we should imitate Joseph and Nicodemus. When Christ hangs on the cross, that is, when the Gospel is persecuted and poor Christians are tortured for its sake, we should stand forth, and, not heeding the tyrant's wrath, glorify God's Son and His Word, and honor it by publicly confessing it until Christ who died shall appear in His glorious resurrection, when fainthearted, timid, and fearful Christians also shall receive comfort and return to the confession.

Such changes shall always occur in the Church. Some are offended and fall back, and generally the strongest grow weak when affliction comes, while the weakest advance and let their joyful confession be heard, so that there are always some who acknowledge and confess Christ. Whether it is unwillingness or inability that keeps the strong from doing this, on account of the offence, the very weakest, who make no display at all, must do it for them, and the former then learn and experience the utter nothingness of men when God removes His Spirit from them. God, as a rich House-holder, wants all kinds of servants in His house; not only such as are strong and full grown, but also such as are weak and small. That the strong may not despise the rest, they have occasion given them to see weakness in themselves;

### Thirteenth Passion Sermon

and that no one may judge his fellow, God's Spirit comes upon the weak, admonishing, comforting and strengthening them in such measure that all must see and praise God's power in them. The sufferings of our dear Lord Jesus operate thus in His Church forever, in order that it may not go to ruin, but stand and grow and expand.

What, however, is the effect on those who hate the Lord Jesus, and who have no peace until they have crucified Him? Just the reverse. The effect of Christ's death can be compared to the effect of the sun, which is different on different materials. Wax is softened and melted by the sun, while mud is made hard and dry. Pious hearts are made so cheerful and bold by the sufferings of Christ, that they venture to do what they would by no means have attempted while Christ yet lived.

[Some leaders of the] Jews hurried Christ off to death in the hope that, when He should have been silenced, their cares would forever be gone. But when their malice was gratified in seeing that Christ had died upon the cross and was laid into a new tomb, they begin to be uneasy, and they all go to Pilate and say:

"Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while He was yet alive, After three days I will rise again. Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night, and steal Him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first."

If we carefully notice these words we shall find what kind of hearts these people had. They remembered Christ's sayings well enough and understood them too, but what fruit did His sayings bring forth in them? Joseph and Nicodemus, who, no doubt, also remembered these words and comforted themselves with them at the time they were spoken, are now made courageous and joyful by them, and hope for every blessing. But these knaves grow restless, and begin to get scared at the dead Man, however natural it may otherwise be for men not to fear an enemy after they know

him to be dead. The wicked Jews enjoy no such composure, but, as we see, they fear the departed Christ, who is lying in the tomb.

Before Pilate they pretended that His disciples might steal Him away and say that He is risen; but in their hearts the words of the Lord Jesus are such a pricking and piercing thorn that they anxiously ask themselves: What if they were true after all? What if He should be the Messiah and rise again from the dead? What would become of us then? — This disturbs and disheartens them. But they are none the better for these thoughts. They do not argue thus: Alas, what have we done! Let us yet creep to the cross and not despise the excellent admonitions and miracles which came to light at His death. — No, they do not want to think in this way. They persist in that hatred and enmity with which they persecuted the Lord Jesus. They perceptibly grow worse and more wicked still. They devise all possible means and ways for annihilating the Lord Jesus and for diminishing His glory.

This too was written as an example and warning for us, that, when we see similar things done by the enemies of the Word, we may not become frightened. God's inevitable rule is this: the longer a man willfully opposes the Word, the deeper he must sink into sin, and the longer he seeks rest, the greater shall grow his restlessness and fear. It was just so too in the case of the blood of the Lord Jesus, of which we heard above. The Jews thought it a very little thing that they nailed Christ to the cross and slew Him in a deliberate, careless and trifling spirit they say: "His blood be on us, and on our children." They afterward found what a little thing it was, alas, for Jerusalem and the whole land to be ruined on account of this. Here the case is exactly as it was there. They thought: If only this Jesus were out of the way once, we should not be troubled any more. Now, in the 2. chapter of Acts it is written that Christ was "delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God" into the shameful death upon the cross. This only increased the fears of

### Thirteenth Passion Sermon

the Jews, so that they had less peace than before. The words of Christ, although they did not believe them, still lay in their hearts like a burning fire, or a gnawing worm. While they could not believe them, they still could not altogether set them aside. So it must always be with the foes of the Word. The more they seek peace by means of tyranny, the deeper they fall, not only into trouble, but also into sin.

Although their plans may be laid in the greatest wisdom, they shall find in the end that they have only injured their cause, and aided the Gospel in spite of themselves, just as it was with the Jews. These demanded guards of Pilate, who should make the sepulchre sure until the third day. "Pilate said unto them, Ye have a watch: go your way, make it as sure as ye can." Matthew says, "They went and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch." This they did to prevent the disciples from stealing the body of the Lord Jesus and from telling the people that Christ was risen from the dead. It was very wisely schemed, but how did it succeed? Their very fears were realized. When, early on Easter morning, Christ had risen from the dead, and the angel descended from heaven and came to the sepulchre and rolled back the stone from the door, and a great earthquake came, the keepers did shake, and became as dead men. As soon as they had recovered from the shock, they gathered themselves up, one ran this way, another that, and came to Jerusalem, where they told the chief priests all the things that were done. What, think you, must then have been the thoughts of these priests? How must their hearts not have quaked and trembled! They could not look on it as a jest, for there stood their own witnesses, the soldiers of Pilate, whom Pilate himself had sent to guard the tomb. These not only told them, but also showed in their entire conduct, what had happened. So severe a fright as theirs had been, is not so easily concealed. The speech betrays it; the countenance shows it; the whole body is so affected by it, as to make it known. It is, therefore, easily seen that this mes-

sage must have terribly frightened the chief priests and elders. Instead, however, of being bettered by this message, they only rushed deeper into sin and made their evil conscience worse. They held a council on that very Sabbath day, and gave much money to the soldiers that they might help them lie, and instructed them to say, "His disciples came by night, and stole Him away while we slept." In this way these poor fellows sought to console and help themselves. They believed in their hearts that Christ, whom they had delivered to die, though innocent, had risen from the dead. Each one can imagine for himself how this must have troubled them; for, under such circumstances, their hearts could never have been calm. And yet, they gave much money to have their lies spread, and to have people persuaded to believe what they themselves did not believe. They who thus willfully resist the truth, and adorn and comfort themselves with known falsehoods, are surely spiteful and desperate wretches, We should learn this, so that we may know how to look upon the foes of the Word. He who resists the truth, as has been said already, has only falsehood left to shield him.

In the meanwhile our dear Lord Jesus comforts His few scattered followers, and shows Himself to them, and proves to them by very deed that He is not dead, but living, and living as the Conqueror of death forever. The lies of those who hate the Word only help so much the more to spread the tidings and to give them notoriety. Had the Jews not guarded the tomb themselves, the falsehood, that Christ's body had been stolen, would have been more plausible; but it does not serve its purpose; for the guards had been stationed around the tomb, and the door of the sepulchre had been carefully sealed. The very fact of their fleeing sufficiently shows that a higher and greater power than that of Pilate and his guards was present.

So it always is with the enemies of the Gospel. They must resort to base and blasphemous lies, which, however, do not harm the Word,

### Thirteenth Passion Sermon

but further it in spite of them. This should move every one to learn to know and to flee from lies, and to abide by the Word and by the truth. God be praised that some in our day have learned this, ... The longer the enemies of the truth attack it, the more violent they become; but the suffering of our dear Lord Jesus has brought it about that they must thus, against their will, further the truth.

The Evangelists relate particularly that the sepulchre, into which the Lord Jesus was laid, was in a garden, that no one had ever been laid into it, and that Joseph had ordered it to be made for himself. This is related, not only to make the evidence of Christ's resurrection more reliable, but also because the body to be buried was not an ordinary one, but was different from all that had ever been on earth, and therefore deserved a special and new house, or tomb.

The flesh and blood of our dear Lord Jesus was like our own, with only this difference, that the flesh and blood in which the Son of the eternal Father appeared was holy flesh and blood. It was proper, therefore, that this flesh and blood should rest from its work in an entirely new tomb. The sepulchre was not His own, however, but that of Joseph. Christ did not become man and die for His own, but for our sake; and even so He lies in the tomb for our sake, and His tomb is our tomb. He had no tomb of His own, because He did not intend to remain in death and the grave; and so shall we through His resurrection be called from death and the grave on the judgment day and live with Him forever.

Another thing worthy of notice here is the conduct of Joseph, who had a tomb made for himself while he was yet living. This clearly shows that he did not leave the last hour out of mind, as the children of the world are wont to do, for they accommodate themselves to this life as if they were to remain here always. The pious look upon their whole earthly life as a pilgrimage, for they know that they have no continuing city here, and

therefore they desire a better country, that is, an everlasting and a heavenly.

A man on a journey may come to a pleasant inn, but he does not wish to abide there, for he knows that it is not his home. So Christians look upon this life as a lodging-place for a night. Kind treatment they accept with gratitude, but if the inn, as is generally the case, is cold and poor and uncomfortable, they find comfort in the thought that when this one cheerless night is over all will be well. Pious Joseph looked upon life in this way. He was a wealthy and honorable citizen of Jerusalem, still his constant thoughts were these: Thou canst not remain here always; thou too must take thy leave. Hence in the garden in which he delighted, he had a tomb prepared for himself, in which he expected to rest while waiting with all the saints for the glorious resurrection through Christ.

The rich should consider this and also erect such monuments on their pleasure-grounds, that they might be reminded of the life to come and be drawn away from the present life. But we find that every one seeks to avoid such thoughts, and aspires only after mirth and pleasure, although they are uncertain and transient and cannot be relied on even for one moment.

Thus, dear Christians, you have heard the whole history of the sufferings of the Lord Jesus. We have now seen God's Son Himself toiling under the weight of sin and atoning for sin with His death. Hence this history would teach us, first of all, that the burden of sin is great and grievous, so that we might be led to live in the fear of God and to beware of such a burden.

It also teaches us to find all comfort in Christ's sacrifice, so that should even sin and death attack us, we might still have the consolation sure that Christ has atoned for our sins, and that God, for Christ's sake, will be satisfied with us and not hold our sins in remembrance. These are the two chief doctrines which the history of

### Thirteenth Passion Sermon

the passion teaches us and in which we should constantly exercise ourselves.

This history, because it sets before us the example of Christ, is profitable besides for patience in suffering. It also urges us to love our neighbor, which the Lord Himself often urges us to do in words like these: "Love one another, as I have loved you." But who is able to relate all the benefits of our Lord Jesus' sufferings?

We should therefore heartily thank God for this doctrine, and pray that He through His Holy Spirit would make it burn brightly in our souls, and make us stronger day by day in faith and love and patience, until we shall have passed from this life of sorrow to the life eternal. May our merciful heavenly Father, through His Holy Spirit, grant us this for the sake of Jesus Christ, His dear Son, our Lord. Amen.