

Martin Luther, *A Meditation on Christ's Passion*, 1519¹

On Invocavit Sunday, March 13, 1519, Luther wrote his friend George Spalatin, "I am planning a treatise dealing with the meditation of Christ's passion. I do not know, however, whether I shall have enough leisure to write it out. Yet I shall try hard."² Nevertheless, it was a mere three weeks later, on April 5, that Luther was able to send a printed copy of his work on the passion to Spalatin.

Such meditations on the sufferings of Christ were a popular form of Lenten devotion during the Middle Ages. Although deep-rooted tradition provided the form in which they were embodied, the thoughts expressed by Luther were the early fruit of his evolving theology.

Most of the twenty-four editions have title woodcuts showing the crucified Christ, with Mary and John standing at the foot of the cross. Others have woodcuts showing either Christ with an unidentified man kneeling before him, Christ sitting on a rock surrounded by instruments of torture, Christ at prayer in Gethsemane, or Christ and the torture instruments, with Christ holding a chalice in his left hand.

1. Some people meditate on Christ's passion by venting their anger on the Jews. This singing and ranting about "wretched Judas"³ satisfies them, for they are in the habit of complaining about other people, of

¹ Translated by Martin H. Bertram. The translation is based on the German text, Ein Sermon van der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi, in WA 2, (130) 136-142. A copy of this version is extant in the State Library in Munich and bears a dedication in Luther's handwriting: "P Magistro Venceslao...." referring to Wenceslas Link, a close friend of Luther, was a preacher at Niirnberg. This text is accepted as the original, for it is unlikely that Luther would have dedicated any but the first print to one of his friends.

<http://www.lutheranmissiology.org/Luther%20Meditate%20Passion%20of%20Christ.pdf>

² LW 48, 114.

³ Luther alludes to a medieval German hymn, O du armer Judas, was hast du getan ("Ah, Thou Wretched Judas, What Is It You Have Done?"). MA3 1, 520.

condemning and reproaching their adversaries. That might well be a meditation on the wickedness of Judas and the Jews, but not on the sufferings of Christ.

2. Some point to the manifold benefits and fruits that grow from contemplating Christ's passion. There is a saying ascribed to Albertus⁴ about this, that it is more beneficial to ponder Christ's passion just once than to fast a whole year or to pray a psalm daily, etc. These people follow this saying blindly and therefore do not reap the fruit of Christ's passion, for in so doing they are seeking their own advantage...

3. Some feel pity for Christ, lamenting and bewailing his innocence. They are like the women who followed Christ from Jerusalem and were chided and told by Christ that it would be better to weep for themselves and their children [Luke 23:27-28]. They are the kind of people who go far afield in their meditation on the passion, making much of Christ's farewell from Bethany⁵ and of the Virgin Mary's anguish⁶ but never progressing beyond that, which is why so many hours are devoted to the contemplation of Christ's passion. Only God knows whether that is invented for the purpose of sleeping or of waking.⁷

Also to this group belong those who have learned what rich fruits the holy mass offers. In their simplemindedness they think it enough simply to hear mass. In support of this several teachers are cited to us who hold that the mass is *opere operati, non opere operantis*,⁸ that it is effective in itself without our merit and worthiness, and that this is all that is needed.

⁴ Albert Magnus (1193-1280) was a scholastic theologian, often called "Doctor universalis," and a teacher of Thomas Aquinas.

⁵ John 12:1-8.

⁶ John 19:25-27.

⁷ It was not unusual for such contemplations to last four or five hours. Often they were much longer, and the pious frequently fell asleep. On these devotional exercises, see Florenz Landmann, *Das Predigtwesen in Westfalen in der Letzten Zeit des Mittelalters* (Munster, 1900), p. 75.

⁸ I.e., the mechanical performance of the mass makes it valid and effective, not the inward intent or disposition of the one who celebrates the mass.

Yet the mass was not instituted for its own worthiness, but to make us worthy and to remind us of the passion of Christ. Where that is not done, we make of the mass a physical and unfruitful act, though even this is of some good. Of what help is it to you that God is God, if he is not God to you? Of what benefit is it to you that food and drink are good and wholesome in themselves if they are not healthful for you? And it is to be feared that many masses will not improve matters as long as we do not seek the right fruit in them.

4. They contemplate Christ's passion aright who view it with a terror-stricken heart and a despairing conscience. This terror must be felt as you witness the stern wrath and the unchanging earnestness with which God looks upon sin and sinners...

5. You must get this thought through your head and not doubt that you are the one who is torturing Christ thus, for your sins have surely wrought this. In Acts 2 [:36—37] ...

6. For every nail that pierces Christ, more than one hundred thousand should in justice pierce you, yes, they should prick you forever and ever more painfully! When Christ is tortured by nails penetrating his hands and feet, you should eternally suffer the pain they inflict and the pain of even more cruel nails, which will in truth be the lot of those who do not avail themselves of Christ's passion. This earnest mirror,⁹ Christ, will not lie or trifle, and whatever it points out will come to pass in full measure.

7. St. Bernard¹⁰ was so terrified by this that he declared, "I regarded myself secure; I was not aware of the eternal sentence that had been passed on me in heaven until I saw that God's only Son had compassion upon me and offered to bear this sentence for me. Alas, if the situation is that serious, I should not make light of it or feel secure."...

⁹ I.e. the one in and through whom we see our sin in its starkness.

¹⁰ St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), Cistercian monk, mystic, and founder of the abbey of Clairvaux, was held in high regard and frequently quoted by Luther.

8. We must give ourselves wholly to this matter, for the main benefit of Christ's passion is that man sees into his own true self and that he be terrified and crushed by this. Unless we seek that knowledge, we do not derive much benefit from Christ's passion. The real and true work of Christ's passion is to make man conformable to Christ, so that man's conscience is tormented by his sins in like measure as Christ was pitifully tormented in body and soul by our sins. This does not call for many words but for profound reflection and a great awe of sins. Take this as an illustration: a criminal is sentenced to death for the murder of the child of a prince or a king. In the meantime you go your carefree way, singing and playing, until you are cruelly arrested and convicted of having inspired the murderer. Now the whole world closes in upon you, especially since your conscience also deserts you. You should be terrified even more by the meditation on Christ's passion. For the evildoers, the Jews, whom God has judged and driven out, were only the servants of your sin; you are actually the one who, as we said, by his sin killed and crucified God's Son.

9. He who is so hardhearted and callous as not to be terrified by Christ's passion and led to a knowledge of self, has reason to fear. For it is inevitable, whether in this life or in hell, that you will have to become conformable to Christ's image and suffering. At the very least, you will sink into this terror in the hour of death and in purgatory and will tremble and quake and feel all that Christ suffered on the cross. Since it is horrible to lie waiting on your deathbed, you should pray God to soften your heart and let you now ponder Christ's passion with profit to you. Unless God inspires our heart, it is impossible for us of ourselves to meditate thoroughly on Christ's passion. No meditation or any other doctrine is granted to you that you might be boldly inspired by your own will to accomplish this. You must first seek God's grace and ask that it be accomplished by his grace and not by your own power. That is why

the people we referred to above fail to view Christ's passion aright. They do not seek God's help for this, but look to their own ability to devise their own means of accomplishing this. They deal with the matter in a completely human but also unfruitful way...

11. Since this [strangling of the old Adam] does not rest with us, it happens that we occasionally pray for it, and yet do not attain it at once. Nevertheless we should neither despair nor desist. At times this happens because we do not pray for it as God conceives of it and wishes it, for it must be left free and unfettered...

12. Until now we have sojourned in Passion Week and rightly celebrated Good Friday. Now we come to the resurrection of Christ, to the day of Easter. After man has thus become aware of his sin and is terrified in his heart, he must watch that sin does not remain in his conscience, for this would lead to sheer despair... Therefore beware, lest you do as those perverse people who torture their hearts with their sins and strive to do the impossible, namely, get rid of their sins by running from one good work or penance to another, or by working their way out of this by means of indulgences. Unfortunately such false confidence in penance and pilgrimages is widespread.

13. You cast your sins from yourself and onto Christ when you firmly believe that his wounds and sufferings are your sins, to be borne and paid for by him, as we read in Isaiah 53[:6], "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." St. Peter says, "in his body has he borne our sins on the wood of the cross" [I Pet. 2:24]. St. Paul says, "God has made him a sinner for us, so that through him We would be made just" [II Cor. 5:21]. You must stake everything on these and similar verses. The more your conscience torments you, the more tenaciously must you cling to them. If you do not do that, but presume to still your conscience with your contrition and penance, you will never obtain peace of mind, but will have to despair in the end.

14. If, as was said before, you cannot believe, you must entreat God for faith. This too rests entirely in the hands of God... However, you can spur yourself on to believe. First of all, you must no longer contemplate the suffering of Christ (for this has already done its work and terrified you), but pass beyond that and see his friendly heart and how this heart beats with such love for you that it impels him to bear with pain your conscience and your sin. Then your heart will be filled with love for him, and the confidence of your faith will be strengthened. Now continue and rise beyond Christ's heart to God's heart and you will see that Christ would not have shown this love for you if God in his eternal love had not wanted this, for Christ's love for you is due to his obedience to God. Thus you will find the divine and kind paternal heart, and, as Christ says, you will be drawn to the Father through him. Then you will understand the words of Christ, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, etc." [John 3:16]. We know God aright when we grasp him not in his might or wisdom (for then he proves terrifying), but in his kindness and love. Then faith and confidence are able to exist, and then man is truly born anew in God.

15. After your heart has thus become firm in Christ, and love, not fear of pain, has made you a foe of sin, then Christ's passion must from that day on become a pattern for your entire life. Henceforth you will have to see his passion differently. Until now we regarded it as a sacrament which is active in us while we are passive, but now we find that we too must be active, namely, in the following. If pain or sickness afflicts you, consider how paltry this is in comparison with the thorny crown and the nails of Christ. If you are obliged to do or to refrain from doing things against your wishes, ponder how Christ was bound and captured and led hither and yon. If you are beset by pride, see how your Lord was mocked and ridiculed along with criminals... So then, this is how we can draw strength and encouragement from Christ against every vice and failing.

That is a proper contemplation of Christ's passion, and such are its fruits. And he who exercises himself in that way does better than to listen to every story of Christ's passion or to read all the masses. This is not to say that masses are of no value, but they do not help us in such meditation and exercise.

Those who thus make Christ's life and name a part of their own lives are true Christians. St. Paul says, "Those who belong to Christ have crucified their flesh with all its desires" [Gal. 5:24]. ...And St. Peter, "Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, strengthen and arm yourselves by meditating on this" [I Pet. 4:1]. However, such meditation has become rare, although the letters of St. Paul and St. Peter abound with it. We have transformed the essence into semblance and painted our meditations on Christ's passion on walls and made them into letters.

Martin Luther, *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, 1520¹¹

The Open Letter was written after Luther realized that his break with Rome was irrecoverable, but before the Diet of Worms. Thousands of copies were printed and circulated through Germany; the letter is addressed to the German princes and knights.

The Romanists have with great skill built three walls around themselves, with which till now they have protected themselves so that no one has been able to reform them; whereby all Christendom has suffered woefully. In the first place, when attacked by the temporal power they have laid it down that temporal power has no authority over them, but that on the contrary the spiritual power is superior to the temporal. Secondly, when Scripture was cited for their correction, they have objected that no one may interpret Holy Writ except the pope. Thirdly,

when threatened with a General Council, they have invented the notion that only the pope may call one. Thus privily robbing us of three rods, they have escaped punishment; they have sat behind the safe fortification of these three walls and practised all the villainy and wickedness which now we see. Even when compelled to convene a Council, they have beforehand deprived it of its sting by first putting the princes under oath to leave things as they were. Also they have given the pope full power over the business of the Council, so that it has been no matter whether there are many Councils or none; they have deceived us with mockeries and shadow-fights. So fearfully do they guard their skins against a truly free Council and have put kings and princes in doubt, till these believe it to be against God not to obey them in all these villainous and cunning little games.

Now may God help us and give us one of the trumpets which overthrew the walls of Jericho, that we may blow down these straw and paper walls, set free the Christian rods of correction, and bring to daylight the devil's tricks and cheats, so that through penitence we may be reformed and recover His favor.

The first wall attacked: They have invented a distinction of calling the pope, the bishops, the priests and the cloistered sort the estate spiritual, while princes, lords, artificers and peasantry are called temporal. Which is a pretty comment and gloss, though no one need take fright at it, for this reason: all Christians are in truth the spiritual estate, and there is no distinction among them except of office. As Paul says (1 Cor. 12.12): we are all one body, but every member has his own proper function in serving the others... Unction by pope or bishop, tonsure, ordination, consecration, clothes different from a lay-man's—all these may make a hypocrite or painted idol but can never make a Christian or a spiritual man.

Thus the bishop's act of ordination does this only: acting for the whole congregation, he takes one man from the crowd (all of whom have the same authority) and orders him to exercise this authority for the

¹¹ From G.R. Elton, *Renaissance and Reformation, 1300-1648* (Macmillan, 1976), 181-185.

rest... This is why in an emergency anybody may administer baptism and absolution, which would be impossible if we were not all priests...

Thus it follows that there is no real difference among laymen, priests, princes, bishops, and—as the phrase goes—spiritual and temporal, except on grounds of office or occupation; certainly none of estate. . . . Therefore those now called spiritual—priests or bishops or pope—differ from other Christians to no greater or more important degree than that they shall administer the Word of God and the sacraments. That is their work and office. The temporal power holds the sword and the rod to punish evildoers and protect the pious. The cobbler, the smith, the ploughman have each their proper function and work, and yet are all equally ordained to be priests and bishops; and each in his function or work shall be useful and serve the rest, so that the work of many shall contribute in common to the welfare of body and soul, as the members of the body all serve one another.

Now see in how Christian a manner they maintain and say that the temporal arm is not superior to the spiritual and cannot control it... Therefore I say, because the temporal arm is ordained by God for the punishment of evildoers and the protection of the pious, its exercise is to be left free and unhindered throughout the whole body of Christendom, not respecting any persons, be they pope, bishop, parsons, monks, nuns, or whoever else. If to limit the secular arm it were enough to say that among Christian offices it is inferior to the functions of the preacher and confessor, or the estate of the spirituality, it would follow that tailors, cobblers, masons, carpenters, cooks, household servants, peasants and all temporal labourers should be stopped from providing shoes, clothes, houses, food or drink for the pope, the bishops, priests and monks—or from paying them taxes. . . .

The second wall is less solid and resistant. The Romanists claim to be sole masters of Scripture, even though all their lives they may never have learned a word of it. They arrogate authority to themselves and juggle with impudent words, saying the pope, bad or good, cannot err in

matters of faith, though they cannot quote so much as a letter in support...

It is a wicked lie and fable, for which they can bring never a letter to prove it, that the pope alone can interpret Scripture or give authority to its interpretation. They took that power to themselves. And where they pretend that the authority was granted to St. Peter when he received the keys: it is manifest enough that the keys were not given to St. Peter alone, but to the whole community. Moreover, the keys were ordained not for doctrine or government, but only for the power to bind and loose...

The third wall falls by itself when the first two are thrown down; for where the pope acts contrary to Scripture it is incumbent upon us to stand by Scripture and punish him. . . . Also they have no ground in Scripture for maintaining that only the pope has the right to summon or sanction a General Council; that is only part of their own law which has validity only as long as it does no harm to Christendom and the laws of God. When the pope does wrong, such laws cease, because it would be harmful to Christendom not to punish him by means of a Council. . . . Therefore, where necessity commands and the pope causes an offense in Christendom, whosoever can first do so as a true member of the whole body shall see to the calling of a really free Council. This no one is so well able to achieve as the temporal arm, especially because it is composed of fellow Christians, fellow priests, fellow spirituals, fellows in all capacities, who ought to exercise their office and place by which God has placed them over everyone, without restraint, wherever necessity and advantage call. Would it not be an unnatural proceeding, when a fire breaks out in a city, if everyone had to stand aside, allowing anything that can to burn on and on, solely because the fire started at the mayor's house? In such a case, is not every citizen bound to stir up and call upon the rest? How much more should this happen in Christ's spiritual city when a fire of offense breaks out, let it be in the pope's government or anywhere else. . . .

...Herewith, I hope, the false and lying terrors, with which for a long time the Romanists have made us fearful and of a feeble conscience, shall lie destroyed. Together with all the rest, the Romanists are subject to the sword, have no right to interpret Scripture by mere assertive power and without adequate learning, and have no authority either to prevent a Council or to pledge it, prejudice it, or rob it of its liberty. When they do such things they are in truth the congregation of Anti-christ and the devil, having of Christ nothing but the name.

Now, although I am too insignificant a man to make propositions for the improvement of this dreadful state of affairs, nevertheless I shall sing my fool's song through to the end and say, so far as I am able, what could and should be done, either by the temporal authority or by a general council.

1. Every prince, every noble, every city should henceforth forbid their subjects to pay *annates* [annual payments; church taxes] to Rome and should abolish them entirely...

2. Since the pope with his Romanist practices—his...pensions, *pallia*, chancery rules, and such knavery—usurps for himself all the German foundations without authority and right, and gives and sells them to foreigners at Rome who do nothing for Germany in return, and since he robs the local bishops of their rights and makes mere ciphers and dummies of them, and thereby acts contrary to his own canon law, common sense, and reason, it has finally reached the point where the livings and benefices are sold to coarse, unlettered asses and ignorant knaves at Rome out of sheer greed. Pious and learned people do not benefit from the service or skill of these fellows. Consequently, the poor German people must go without competent and learned prelates and go from bad to worse.

For this reason the Christian nobility should set itself against the pope as against a common enemy and destroyer of Christendom for the salvation of the poor souls who perish because of this tyranny.

3. An imperial law should be issued that no bishop's cloak and no confirmation of any dignity whatsoever shall henceforth be secured from

Rome, but that the ordinance of the most holy and famous Council of Nicaea be restored. This ordinance decreed that a bishop shall be confirmed by the two nearest bishops or by the archbishop . . .

7. The Roman see should do away with the *officia*, and cut down the creeping, crawling swarm of vermin at Rome, so that the pope's household can be supported out of the pope's own pocket. ...

9. The pope should have no authority over the emperor, except the right to anoint and crown him at the altar just as a bishop crowns a king...

13. Next we come to the masses who make many vows but keep few. Do not be angry, my noble lords! I really mean it for the best. It is the bittersweet truth that the further building of mendicant houses [i.e. monasteries] should not be permitted. God help us, there are already too many of them...