



GJ Back to God GJ-eour

· His Exquisite
Suffering

DENOMINATIONAL BROADCAST
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HIS EXQUISITE SUFFERING

He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Isaiah 53:5

I had never heard the word *exquisite* used with pain before, but I will never forget that the doctor used it that day; I was lying on the examining table, sure that I was having a heart attack. The pain in my chest was intense. I had been working at home when the pain hit me. When it didn't go away, I called my friend, the doctor, and he said to come down and he would check me over. It wasn't a heart attack; it was a muscle spasm right in the middle of my chest. He touched the spot. I winced. "Ah," he said, "the pain is exquisite, isn't it?" I agreed it was, though I didn't usually associate the word *exquisite* with pain. Later, when I had the presence of mind to look up the meaning of this word, I discovered that it meant, among other things, "intense," "acute," "keen" as in "exquisite pain" and "exquisite pleasure."

That's the way you learn. You learn about pain when you have it. And that's

the way you learn about exquisite pain, too. How we hate it! We program our lives to avoid it. We arrange everything so that we don't have to experience it. But it still comes, no matter how carefully we try to avoid it.

Exquisite pain ... exquisite suffering - do you know who suffered the most, the absolute most? Jesus did.

How can I help you perceive Jesus' exquisite suffering? How can we reach back across the years and transpose the agony of Jesus' ordeal to the present in such a way that each of us will be able to feel its intensity? Well, there is no way this can be done, really, for His suffering was incomparable. There is no impassive, stoic, immovable God at the center of Christianity. Other religions may have gods like that, but not Christianity. At the center of Christianity there is the true God who suffered in Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity become flesh.

Jesus' exquisite suffering came to the fullness of its intensity on Calvary, a low hill outside Jerusalem. Calvary was in fact a hill raised over garbage that had been dumped there for years and years, something like the growing hills I ride past near my house, made from soil they have heaped over rubbish. Pipes driven into

the hills carry off the putrid gases that still form deep within the hills, and the flames from the pipes light the sweltering summer evenings and make them even more unbearable. Such was the place Jesus died.

Between two criminals-He died in such disgrace. This was an element of His suffering most of us will never be able to fathom. When we suffer, at least people are nice to us. Hospitals today compete with each other to see who can make the patient most comfortable. There are classes now that teach nurses and doctors to be kinder. When we suffer, every attention is paid to our whims and desires. "Please, call the nurse, and have her moisten my mouth," the dying man on oxygen murmurs, and the nurse comes and does it. With Jesus it was different.

To try to sense something of what He went through, I want to look at some of the details of Jesus' crucifixion, as Isaiah 53:5 describes it:

He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Pierced, crushed, punishment,
these are the words the prophet used as

he was inspired by the Holy Spirit of God to see Jesus' crucifixion, which was still more than seven hundred years in the future. If we use Isaiah's vocabulary, we will begin to comprehend Jesus' exquisite suffering.

The suffering of Christ runs through the entire Bible. It is portrayed in the Old Testament animal sacrifices. Romans 6:23 says that the wages of sin is death, and that is not a figure of speech. The Old Testament sacrifices were brought as substitutions for the people who were guilty and worthy of death. Among the animals sacrificed, none was more touching and sad than the lamb of Passover that the people of Israel slaughtered as they prepared to leave Egypt. On the frightful night when the firstborn of Egypt were to be slaughtered, the Lord commanded the people to slaughter a lamb and to paint their doorposts with its blood; "When I see the blood, I will pass over you," He said (Exodus 12:13). And Jesus Christ, God's only Son, finally became the lamb of Passover. John the Baptist heralded Jesus' approach with the announcement: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

Isaiah picked up on this great figure of God's deliverance when he looked for-

ward to Jesus' crucifixion and described Christ as if He were a Passover lamb: "He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (53:7).

Other Old Testament passages, too, can send a shiver up and down your spine. They make you realize that Jesus' crucifixion, though occurring in fact later in date in the first century, exerted its saving power over the pending centuries. Psalm 22 is a passage like that, beginning as it does with the very words Jesus later spoke on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This psalm accurately depicts the behavior of those who ridiculed Jesus while He hung on the cross:

But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see mock and they hurl insults, shaking their heads: "He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him" (vv. 6-8).

Yes, these very words were used to insult the Savior on that Good Friday afternoon that He died.

But it is Isaiah 53 that captures the broad sweep of Christ's exquisite suffering with

the most precision. Who can read it now without catching his breath in wonderment? Jesus Christ, verse 5 says, was pierced, crushed, crushed, and wounded.

The Savior was pierced ... reading this prophecy reminded me of something a student nurse wrote the other day in a paper on pressure sores-bed sores. She handed the paper to me to read, but I could hardly recognize what she was talking about because the language is so scientific; there was too much jargon. She wrote about one of her patients, a seventy-three-year-old woman who had developed these sores. The nurse stated that the "integrity" of the woman's skin was broken. Indeed. Lie on a bed too long, and you will develop these distasteful, ugly problems on your buttocks, your shoulder blades, or even on your elbows. They are very hard to treat. The nurse told me that last year it cost an average of \$15,000 to cure one bed sore. I couldn't believe it.

The integrity of our skin, keeping it whole-this is a primary concern of ours. When the integrity of our skin is broken, we shudder, or we complain, or we shriek if the tearing and piercing are bad enough. Sometimes, in the winter, the integrity of my skin is broken on my index

finger because of the dryness of the air—a little crack develops about one-third of an inch long, just above the nail. And when I type, I have to be very careful—otherwise I will feel pain. Our skin .our precious skin! Don't tear it or rip it or pierce it, please don't.

Surely, when we think of Jesus' suffering, we must remember that this was part of it for Him. Before He even went to the place of execution, He was mercilessly flogged by Pilate's soldiers. When the Jews flogged someone, they were careful never to strike more than thirty-nine times. But the Roman soldiers were experts at flogging—they would tie shards of broken glass into their whips and braid fiendish knots along the whips' length. And they would beat their prisoners to within an inch of death. Jesus endured that. That along with the crown of thorns pressed around His head and across His brow left Him looking like a person who today might have been pulled torn and bleeding from an automobile accident.

And crucifixion itself amounted to one massive, impudent assault on the skin of the victim. Just how it was handled in Jesus' case, we don't know. Some now say that Jesus was not killed with His arms stretched out parallel to the earth so His

hands were about on a level with His shoulders. Some say that He was nailed to one single pole and His arms were stretched upward, with His hands crossed above His head. Who can say? What we know is that there were nails driven through His precious skin; its integrity was broken, we might say today, using the jargon of a student nurse. The nails were ghastly invasions of His body's sacred wholeness, and later a sword was run through into His side, upward so that His heart and the sac surrounding it were pierced.

Surely, such suffering was exquisite; that is, it was intense and acute, keen and fierce. It was a suffering each of us would flee if there were any way we could escape it. He walked toward it deliberately, knowing, especially during the last months of His ministry, that there was no avoiding it.

He was also crushed. I am well aware that when Isaiah said that Jesus was pierced and crushed and punished and wounded, he did not mean to separate each of these. For Isaiah 53 is Hebrew poetry, and these are synonyms meant to focus attention on what really happened. But we can use these words to shake our selves out of the lethargy we often feel

when we hear of the suffering of others.

Crushing is different from piercing. We experience crushing differently. We need to maintain the space our bodies need, and we need some space around our bodies. We don't even like it when people get too close to us. We sense when they are intruding on our space. It is fearful to be crushed. Sometimes we can be crushed psychologically. I heard a person say, "I feel as if there are two masses on either side of me, and they are closing in on me, crushing me." This is what it's like when you are growing up and so many people are making demands on you.

But Jesus was crushed physically as well as psychologically. The crown of thorns that pierced His skin had to be crushed down on His forehead before the blood began to flow. A doctor friend of mine who works exclusively on the thoracic area of our anatomy-the region from our chin to our waist-feels that there is evidence that Jesus' heart was bruised even before He left Pilate's judgment hall. He was that battered. And when He hung on the cross, His diaphragm was finally paralyzed, and His rib cage crushed in on His heart and lungs, crushing, crushing, crushing.

We are able now to let our imaginations reach backward and feel something of what that must have been like. Pierced and crushed-I speak about it now entirely comfortably, and possibly you listen comfortably, too. Most of us need something to shock our sensitivities into really feeling a little bit of what Jesus felt. To be sure, some of us have had our own piercing and our own crushing. Some of us, survivors of battle or of operations or of automobile accidents, are jolted by vivid memories of our trauma. So we think about Him, Jesus of Nazareth. His suffering was exquisite, terrifying and intense, horrible through and through.

Punishment-the third word Isaiah used to depict Jesus' suffering-ties all that Jesus experienced into a special package. The cruelty that descended on Him was not merely capricious human sadism. It was heaven-directed and designed in order to accomplish payment for human sin. The piercing, Isaiah said, was for our transgressions, and the crushing was for our iniquities. He was punished so that we sinners who lie beneath the treacherous curse could be relieved of all the upsetting tension and exasperation that have invaded our lives because of our sins. What happened to Jesus was purposeful.

It accomplished something-quite unlike what happens when one of us is pulled crushed and bleeding from a wreck beside the highway.

Christ Jesus' exquisite punishment was as intense as it was because at the cross of Calvary the wrath of God and the mercy of God met in a climactic, cosmic moment that paid the price of sin. On the deepest level, what happened at the cross of Christ will forever escape us; even so, we now know that because of God's sacrifice of His Son, divine forgiveness has become a reality. Now our sins will most assuredly be forgiven if we believe in Jesus and ask God to forgive us for His sake.

As we think about the intense suffering of the Lord, we must nudge each other and remind one another that we ourselves deserve that punishment. This is what sin deserves. In all candor, we must admit to one another that we have become pretty blasé about sin; it doesn't upset us all that much anymore. We expect it, we are not shocked by it, we see it all around us, and yes, let's admit it—we also participate in it. I say and you say, "I am just a human being; I am not perfect, you know."

Since our calloused hearts hardly skip a beat when we observe the worst kind of

sin, we must, to see the full extent of sin's sinfulness, look at Jesus' cross and think about what He suffered and remember that we caused His suffering. Our transgressions, our iniquities, are the cause, Isaiah tells us.

At the cross, sin was paid for and forgiveness became a reality. When we look at the cross, we might be tempted to object that the forgiveness took too much. Why did it take the exquisite suffering of the Son of God? Well, let me remind you that forgiveness comes very hard. We know that from personal experience. Possibly right now there is someone whom you should forgive, but you just can't. Maybe it's your wife, or your husband, or your child, or your father or mother. Or someone else. Perhaps you say, "I could forgive, but I could never forget: I could never deal with that person as if what happened had never happened." Ah, yes, that's just it. Forgiveness means acting as if an event never happened. It is unringing a bell. It is causing something to recede so far into the background that it has no bearing anymore. It is so hard for us to do that.

Well, God had to change the very nature of things in order that forgiveness could become a reality. Sin, guilt, corrup-

tion, evil-they're real. And you and I are part of this dismal scene. God had to come and pay the penalty for us. He had to take care of all this. He had to wipe it all away. This is no little process. It is not something that could be accomplished by some divine wink in heaven's courts. God could not simply overlook evil. He had to take care of it. He had to pay for it.

He did. At Calvary. The flogging, the crown of thorns, the nails, the sword, and the divine wrath-Jesus bore all this. Only a being perfectly human and fully divine could have accomplished what He accomplished.

What we see in Jesus' exquisite suffering is holy love in action. I have tried with these feeble words to summon out of the past the realities of Jesus' crucifixion. To do so, I have leaned heavily on a prophet who lived centuries before the hammer blows nailed Jesus' flesh to timber. The Spirit-inspired words of this prophet have shown us the intensity and depth of Jesus' agony. Please understand that this is the only hope any of us have for salvation. There is no way that we can earn our own salvation. No suffering we endure can ever be offered up as partial payment for our sins. Jesus, and Jesus alone, became the acceptable sacrifice on our behalf.

Now there is but one appropriate reaction: we must believe that this Jesus is the Son of God and that He died for us. I must say, "I believe, O blessed Jesus, that you died for me." And you must say the same.

Through faith we are united with Christ in His suffering. Through faith His suffering becomes our suffering. When we believe in Jesus, it as if we have suffered for our own sins. Thus, as we believe in Him, we receive His sacrifice as payment for our sins, and we offer it to God. "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to your cross I cling." God applies Jesus' perfect sacrifice to our account. We may not think that we do the slightest thing for our own salvation. Jesus did everything necessary.

Nothing that we suffer compares to Jesus' exquisite suffering on Calvary. He suffered on every level: physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. The anguish of those dark hours before He yielded up His spirit, He plunged into the depths of hell itself. And He did so for people like us. His punishment brings us peace, and His wounds bring us healing.

Do you believe in this Jesus? Maybe right now you are suffering intensely, and you wonder what is going to happen to you. Or maybe you feel a long, long ways from God because of your sin. Where you

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