

*That
terrible
beauty
of the son*



Image credit:

<https://www.shutterstock.com/image-vector/hand-crucified-jesus-christ-pierced-nail-1998602723>

Inspired by the Isenheim Altarpiece

I. INTRODUCTION

If you have considered the story of Jesus over the course of some time, you will have likely asked yourself the following question:

What is the true pain of Jesus' experience on the cross? Beyond the obvious (that he was crucified), what is the particular trial he underwent; why should his pain be considered special; and how could that have any effect on me, the world, and so on?

It is, I think, one of these common, early questions someone will develop in the precious and limited time after their first hearing of the Christ's passion. Unfortunately, and I say this because I think it is a very good question, I find the answers offered by the Christian Establishment to be unsatisfying. Or, at the very least, I consider those answers incomplete.

This piece then is an address of the question informed by my own reflections, many of which arise from my personal steeping in the writings of the New Testament. This, however, is not an attempt to put forward an objective argument or anything like that. No; no matter how much you might agree or disagree with what I write, I believe that, as has been the case for me, a deep reflection on this question for yourself ought to bring you closer to the very heart of the beauty of Jesus. So, I recommend on your part that, if stunted, you revive the curiosity you might have once had about this question and adopt the posture of a person freshly acquainted with the story of the Christ. You may thus consider this question with me anew.

II. PAIN

Of the aforementioned answers typically provided regarding the question above, I have seen it most commonly said or implied that the true pain of the cross was the particularly violent and physically painful nature of Roman crucifixion. This idea is often taken up by those who try to depict the passion in movies and tv. The goal being (most of the time) to earnestly translate the message of the gospels into a fundamentally different form, the viewing form. As such, focusing on the physical pain is substantially more suitable for the task. After all, in a visual medium, it is easier to convey pain that is external rather than what is internal and spiritual. As is often the case with adaptations of literature to film, the internal is reduced to something which can be displayed, or more often, it is ignored completely.

In a similar vein to these movies, the passion of the Christ is perhaps spoken of most often, at least publicly, at the Sunday gathering. Here too, I find that it is easier in the form of the sermon to expound on the physical suffering. The preacher, for his part, I'm sure, wants to convey to the people something of the severity of the event, and in my view, it is most readily at his disposal to dive into and collect for presentation to the congregation: morbid and visceral details about Jesus' physical pain. And so we get descriptions of the nails, the thorns, the bits of glass and bone that were often attached to the whip as part of the scourging, details about how exactly one dies on a cross, asphyxiation, difficulty with maintaining posture, dehydration, the condition of his circulatory system at the moment he was pierced, the likely composition of 'sour wine,' and so on.

Thinking about it, I do wonder if 'expound' is the right word to describe these kinds of messages, for I do not think it is rightly understood that most of what is discussed is really in the source material (the writing of the New Testament) upon which to be expounded in the first place. Furthermore, I find that in the apostles' writing about Jesus' death, there is actually little emphasis placed on his physical suffering, especially considering how truly gruesome it must have been.

I do, though, sometimes hear one comment about his inner suffering in the typical Sunday sermon. It usually goes something like, "Jesus' peculiar suffering was that he, accustomed to the closest, most intimate communion with God, for that time he was on the cross, had the feeling of being abandoned by Him." That idea, I find, is usually as close as we get to talking about the internal struggle in both the Sunday sermon and in common conversation. But with that, the hearer's initial curiosity is typically quelled.

To return, for now, to the external, the idea that the true pain of Jesus' suffering was the physical pain is, to me, unsatisfying. And, I should say this with all humility, knowing I have not been met with a fraction of this kind of physical pain, but I would say that there are people, many people even, who, unlike me, have experienced physical pain worse than crucifixion. At the very least, it can be said of those crucified with Jesus that they also experienced that pain. And, think of Jesus' disciples throughout the centuries who have experienced crucifixion and flogging and burning and mutilation and even more perverse forms of torture and execution. These, I

believe, are in large part the 'greater works than these' of which Jesus foretold. As such, the peculiarity of Jesus' pain cannot be based in the physical suffering.

I should note, though, that one might say that the Christ's case is different in that he was fully innocent. He did not deserve his punishment at all, yet he endured it anyway. That is what makes it so painful.

But, do we not see that the innocent are always suffering, and that this is not uncommon? Abel, Joseph, and Job are all images of the innocent sufferer. Think also of infants and small children who suffer. Who would at all lay a claim against them? And, before I hear protest about original sin, I would say that since God hates the shedding of innocent blood, it is, therefore, a thing that happens. If God, who is clean totally beyond our conception, does not hesitate to call those innocent whom he does, why on earth should we? I do understand, though, that there is something in the perfect innocence of the Christ which is peculiar, but I do not think an acknowledgment of his peculiar innocence translates into an understanding of the core of his suffering in the moment of his passion.

If a man innocent of a crime for which he is sentenced to death has a moment to think on the pain of what he is about to experience, of what will he think? Will he think about how wrong it is that this punishment is happening to him because of his innocence? Will he think of the pain of hanging, or the chair, or of chemical execution? Or, will he perhaps, as the moment draws near, start to think of someone he loves and lament not being able to be with them, care for them, or how they might be thrown into

their own pain and grief because of his absence? All of these, I'm sure, are present in his thoughts, but which is at the center?

All that being said, I actually think that this thought on innocence helps us go some of the way. As with Job, someone who could be considered blameless would have all the more reason to ask God why this was happening to him, and to feel as if God had abandoned him. This brings us to that one comment on inwardness made in the typical Sunday sermon, and as much as it is a step in the right direction, I believe it is incomplete.

Again, in this part of the sermon, the preacher might say that Jesus suffered so much because he felt abandoned by God, his father. The Son, who exists in perfect unity with the father, pierced through time and finiteness so that he could enter into and experience the temptation to doubt which is always coincident with faith. He felt as if he was alone in that moment, abandoned by God to endure terrible physical suffering, even death, and as we have already mentioned, completely undeservedly. But this, I think, is not a characterization of the affliction itself, but one's dealing with it. Following the line of what we have discussed so far, it can only go back to the physical suffering. But, if physical suffering alone is not sufficient to complete the picture of his true pain, we are still left with the question: to what did Jesus feel abandoned? His words, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" do not complete a description of his trial. The question remains: Forsaken how? Forsaken to what?

When we go through our own trials, do we not also feel abandoned by God? Saying that at the end of it, we feel abandoned by God is not a

complete description of the difficulty, but only the final and most common step in all the trials that test mankind. My wife has cancer, and she is slowly leaving me, so I feel abandoned by God. I'm homeless and daily carry the shame and spite of the people around me, and so I feel abandoned by God. My son was innocently killed in a car accident. His hopes and mine have died with him, so I feel abandoned by God. We feel abandoned by God because we feel he has not heard our heartfelt pleas for mercy. We feel as if he is indifferent to our suffering. We feel he is cruel or even unjust. Most of all, we feel the loneliness and the desire to hear from him: why? Like Job, we cry out to understand and feel abandoned when we hear no answer.

As a brief aside, I'd like to ask the believer in Jesus, how often do you chide yourself for feeling such things? We should note, I think, that Jesus himself, in his great moment of crisis and pain, cries out to God, expressing his genuine feelings of abandonment, and he asks to understand why. He did so publicly, so for us, especially in private prayer to God, I think we ought to express what God already knows perfectly: the full content of our hearts, namely, the pain and doubt.

But, my main point is that even this answer that, at least moves toward the inward struggle, is still incomplete. It does not describe what happens to the Christ that is so terrible that God's apparent lack of intervention causes him to feel abandoned. And again, I regard the physical pain and death that he endured as not wholly peculiar even in his ultimate innocence. So, I am left prompted to inquire further. What was the unique trial that drove the

Christ's feelings of abandonment and what convictions actually drove him to endure the physical pain of the cross?

III. BEAUTY

If you will, imagine with me again that man awaiting execution. Previously, I indicated that he, in that moment of crisis, might think most centrally in his heart of a beloved one. Now, imagine if that man's beloved (wife, daughter, sister, brother, friend) was actually instrumental in the events leading to his incarceration and impending execution. What if she betrayed him? What if she willed for him to die unjustly? What if she, despite his true love for her, hated him? What if she was there in the viewing room in full anticipation of his death, excited and satisfied?

Well, now we have the set-up of every revenge story! The Count of Montecristo, The Lion King (Hamlet), The Godfather! This is where we might get to see the hero (understood in a worldly way), struggle and triumph to give justice (again according to a natural understanding) to himself, his betrayer, and to the whole community, who will all consider themselves well pleased and the better for seeing justice thus dispensed. But, of course, the schadenfreude of this exercise will only be felt if the story ends in pain for the betrayer. It is unsatisfying, naturally, if the betrayer is let off the hook.

Now, let us return to the story of the Christ. What kind of predicament does he enter into? And, what kind of hero is he? Well, I don't think there is a

need to drag this out any further; he is decidedly not that kind of natural hero.

Far from the adrenaline-juiced, chest-thumping, violent/glorious hero or even the character who might speak softly enough but will not hesitate to wield the sword, the scriptures describe the Christ as a man of sorrows well acquainted with grief. And for him, there is no natural come-up, no getting back at his betrayers. He is sorrowful even unto death. He is abandoned and betrayed though innocent, and while he is tortured all he will say toward the people who watch him die is, 'God please forgive them. They do not know what they are doing.' Though he is provoked into retaliating against his betrayers with the armies of heaven, not stopping until he has trampled over them all as the earthly-righteous hero, Jesus instead prays for them. He continues to love them.

It is a common though still crushing pain to love someone deeply who does not return your love. Now imagine loving someone eternally deeply, eternally truly and not only having them reject you, but having them despise you, regard you as a liar, and kill you so that you would no longer be in the same world as them. It is the worst thing imaginable, the worst pain imaginable. None of us would withstand such rejection. When we are rejected, we would rather convince ourselves, lying if necessary saying, "I did not really love them. I did not really want her. He does not love me; I do not love him." That may actually turn out to be true for such a person. But, what of Jesus' love? Does his passion for his people expire when it is not reciprocated?

Is not the pain and the passion of the Christ then this: that he loved us so truly that in spite of our repudiation of him, he dies for us anyway? So pure and unconditional a love that it would stand and persist through even the hate and unbelief of the beloved. It is as if a betrothed and promised woman found in adultery and contempt for her husband kills him to escape the searing purity of his love and goodness, but he lets her do it; he offers himself up and the blood from his wounds flows onto her and heals her. He redeems her by this. He even redeems her to himself. And, they love each other.

But, no earthly person knows this pain to such an extreme as the Christ because no one has ever loved out of such purity and truth, such sincerity and care for the beloved.

So, then to distill this reflection to one word, I say that the true pain of the cross is Rejection, rejection by the beloved. It is a rejection so acute that it requires nothing less than the otherworldly grasp of faith to comprehend that the man who experienced such rejection, persisted to a cross, endured torture and flogging, spitting and taunts, all while the crowds who chanted to him before, 'Son of David! Son of David!' then cried out all the louder, 'Crucify Him! Crucify Him!' As the apostle John says, 'He came to his own, but his own did not receive him.'

But, you may see in my description of this event that I make repeated reference to 'us' and you might ask yourself what this scene of the Christ's passion has to do with you and me living far removed and in a different time. You might see yourself as having nothing to do with this rejection the

Christ experienced. You were not there, you did not chant, you did not exchange the God-man for the god, Mamon. On that note, you might even place the blame of the betrayal on one individual, Judas Iscariot, and less so on the people. Furthermore, you might say that we are so remote from the situation that one's consideration of this passion is akin to an affinity for the work of Shelley or Dickens: arbitrary and superfluous.

Worse yet, you may believe that these things happened (for this you anticipate receiving eternal blessedness), but you believe this not so much as a belief, but as a fact brought to you by a history which you acknowledge as true not as a present witness but as an assessor of the facts, the history, and as one yet still far removed.

But, are we, in truth, so far removed? Do we know nothing of what it means to reject Love; to look at the brother, sister, neighbor, friend, and deny them, deny them like Peter? 'That man without shelter, I do not know him.' 'Those lives lost in another country, I do not know them.' 'My neighbor in need, I do not know that man!'

No, I actually think here the Christ would insist, as he speaks in the writings of the New Testament, on a choice from the hearer. The choice or challenge is to believe in the proclamation of a story, not one among many such stories, but one of a completely different nature: a unique testimony, which states that once and for all time, a new way of life has been shown on the earth. Now, declare yourself, not merely as one who agrees that it happened, but as one willing to walk in the way He walked, completely contrary to the games played in this world of power which are called justice

and peace, but inwardly, they are the natural schemes of domination and revenge. They are the practice of ravenous wolves.

It is an honest choice. You can remain as you are in this worldly state, the earthly way of things. It is unmeasurably easier to do so, for even to catch a glimpse of the new and contrary way, one must see it supernaturally by faith. One must believe that the Christ could and would love so purely, and one must see oneself as so infinitely close to these events of the Christ that one can reach out to him and love him back, become a participant, and seek him where he may be found.

Admitted as such, it is an impossible task. Yet, supposing, rather believing, that with God all things are possible, let us say that one does make such a confession. What then does the Christ say to the one who, by faith, appears in front of him to deal, to wrestle out this question of how they now relate? What would he say? What did he say?

'You don't really love me, do you? You just had your fill of the loaves.' 'You, my closest friends, will you leave me too?' 'Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me, really?' 'If you really do love me, put my love on for yourself.'

Here I think is the true offence of the story of Jesus, not so much that he recognizes our various sins and shortcomings as such, but that he, being God, would bend so low as to meet us eye to eye and, in full seriousness, profess his love to us, expect us to believe him despite ourselves, and then dare us to love him back.

We often do not like to think of the Christ as loving in this way. It seems pathetic. A jilted lover, persisting in love through any and all cost? And worse, one who calls us to follow him in such a love? It is hard to imagine something more humiliating. Yet, it is this that I find to be so noteworthy about the pain of the son of God. That he who had every right to power, authority, godly detachment and loftiness, condescended and loved. He loved, loved, loved, loved in a way that the prideful mind views as lowly and pathetic. But, the Christ, he did many things considered, in a human way, lowly and pathetic. In a spiritual way, this love is what transfigures that ultimate pain of the cross into its peculiar beauty.

IV. ETERNAL SCARS

Adding to this uniqueness, the pain of the Christ is of an eternal nature. Even in our own lives, we see a kind of pain that stays with a person and does not abate even after the initial moment of injury has passed. This is a most preoccupying and troublesome hurt. It is the thorn in the flesh that will not be removed even after praying with God the full three times. It is Jacob's hip put out of joint that causes him to limp until the day he dies. It is also present in the wounds that Jesus tells Thomas to touch on his hands and in his side. These are the eternal scars of the Christ.

But, for the Christ, the scars of his physical wounds are of no consequence. For, in eternity, who would care or bear pain about a cosmetic aberration on the skin? Only in so far as it could make the bearer remember that moment of pain, would such marks be able to inflict inward hurt anew. In the

Revelation, the Christ is revealed as a lamb with those same signs of slaughter upon him. They are his to wear forever.

One might rather wish to think that in the new heavens, such things will not be visible or remembered, for it says in the scriptures, "I will remember their sins no more." It is a thought which, I am sure, has brought comfort to many. But, I think we Christians accept this idea too comfortably and without giving it its proper consideration.

Let us consider it then: how is the omniscient God going to not remember our sins? How is it that our redemption will be celebrated without the acknowledgement of each of our individual failures and betrayals? How is the God who said, 'When Abraham was, I am,' the God who exists outside of time, going to remove himself from his own omnipresence in the moment of betrayal and pain? How will you, Christian, not think of all the ways you betrayed the Christ when he takes your hands into his and your fingers run across the wounds of his hands? How will you, when you meet his gaze, not see the pain of every time you threw him to the dogs for a moment's worth of pleasure, bashed his teeth in for the slightest advantage over your sister, or turned your face away from his shame and suffering in so far as you did the same to the least of your brothers? The son will indeed wipe away every tear in the new earth, but we will still have reason to shed them.

Jesus, the Christ, will carry into eternity the scars of his passion and suffering. It is why that passion is so deep and effective. He bears these

marks forever and there is no way to, in totality, forget them as much as it may seem that it would be good to do so.

For, truly, it is not only his suffering that by faith makes breach into the eternal but that also of his people who follow him. And this, properly understood, is to be considered as more weighty and glorious than any earthly good.

V. OUR OWN BEAUTY

One last time, imagine with me: the love of your life. Even if you have not yet met such a person, it should still be an easy thing to do. Recall as if from a play or a story this person, but fill in for yourself the image of your own dear, beloved one. Now, imagine this love of yours getting ready for her (pardon the one-sidedness; by all means, read as to provoke the truest imagery in your own head), as I said, her introduction to a great gathering. She will give a speech or something. That exact detail doesn't matter either. What does matter is that she will be revealed.

Now, imagine that she presents herself to you as ready, but her dress is torn. The soles of her shoes have been worn completely through, and her hair is knotted and frayed. Parts of her are shown that should be covered; sensitive parts are not properly respected or adorned.

You say to her, 'Lovely, you are not ready.' She responds to you, 'I am perfectly ready.' You tell her, 'I want you to be revealed with respect and

honor. I want the glory that I see in you to be known to all of the people.’ She, genuinely not understanding, replies, ‘My Love, I know that you love me without condition. Why would glory have any appeal to me? I am fully content with your love. I do not care for the approval that comes from the people.’ You say to her, ‘It is for me that I ask you. Will you adorn yourself for me?’

In our story, it can be assumed that the beloved has been well instructed in love. Love indeed is the supremely unconditioned. And if it were you or I cast in the role of the lover, we may have some ungodly part in us that would want our beloved to adorn herself for the sake of our reputation, to keep the good opinion of those at the gathering, or to avoid upsetting our own sense of aesthetics.

But seeing God in the role of the lover, is he then at fault for questioning his beloved’s dress? Is it for vanity that he insists on her adornment? I think that since God is Love and always loves, we can say that even in this, his design is love. But, if it is painful for the beloved, if she does not naturally will it, how can he insist on her glory?

As God’s people, it is often difficult to see why God passes us through fiery trials even though the scriptures tell us plainly that it is to test our faith. ‘Test’ is used here to mean something like ‘try’ or even to refine as gold. But, in the pain of our losses and trials, I, at least, wonder: of what use is this gold to me? God’s love is enough for me. It is enough for me to be brought into his house, to eat with him at his table, and to share in his presence. As David said, I would rather watch the door in God’s house than

be in the center of anyone else's honor and glory. Jesus himself directs us to pray that God would not lead us into testing, but deliver us when we find ourselves exposed to evil.

So, I think it is very natural to ask, 'God, please spare me from this. Even if it is your design to produce in me a faith that shines as gold in glory, that is of little value to me in light of your love.' But, I think it is God's love that seeks to glorify us, even us. It is not vanity, but love that compels him to glorify his bride in front of the world. It is the task of love to inspire in the world proper appreciation for the beloved.

Again, faith is gold refined in the fire. Afterward, in eternity, although the exercise of its refinement is no longer conducted, it is worn by the bride for glory as the perfect ornament. In this way, the saying that, 'faith, hope, and love abide' is true. Love is the substance; faith and hope rest on the body of love as gold adornment. They are formed, refined, and worn for glory.

But, why does he give some of his people immense suffering over many years and to others he gives lives of ease, or to more clearly demonstrate the point (for choosing a life of ease may very well be considered as living a life short of love), lives that are short without even the opportunity for great suffering? Having an early death is not typically spoken of as a good thing, but to the suffering, it is a common thought: 'Lord, please just end this. I've had enough. Please just take me home.' Job said it would be better for him to be in the grave where the Lord's billows would pass over him. Jonah begged for death at the end of his story. Even more severe are

the words of that infamous teacher in the scriptures who said that better than life is death and better than death is never being born.

To this, as in everything, I can only refer to God's will and discretion; his design. As members of his body, we are not all to be adorned in the same way. It is by his will that his bride's nails should be filed or painted. It is at his discretion that her hair is cut or tied or pressed with an iron. It is his design that a mole on her face should be left where it is or if a hair on her lip should be plucked.

Or, maybe it is not so rigid. Perhaps, it is more like his bride coming out of the dressing room asking, 'How do I look?' And, he points her back to the dressing room saying, 'Almost,' 'A little more here,' 'A little less there.' The will and the agency of the bride is in it somehow, but I will not attempt to reconcile this issue about our will in it. I do not truly believe the metaphor is as tight as him dressing up his bride exactly according to a script. She arranges herself by his design, for his pleasure, of her own will inspired by his, or something like that.. Again, I will not pretend to know it through and through. There is of course a great deal of mystery as to all of this, but truthfully, that is what makes day-to-day life in the spirit so painfully wonderful and exciting.

VI. A BRIDE ADORNED FOR HER HUSBAND

Here at the end, let us look again at the Revelation, and the bride; a different translation puts the above passage as: "I saw the Holy City, the

new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.”

Ignoring the all too commonly debated and considered questions often brought up with a passage like this, let us look at the bride (who I say is the focus of the passage anyway), and let us consider her beauty, our beauty if we would take part.

And in light of our discussion, what is our beautification then as God's people, as Christ's bride, but our inclusion in the fellowship of his suffering? The genuine, redeeming love toward the neighbor is never without its share of sacrifice or rejection. Love requires us to endure that rejection which he endured and to persist in loving the neighbor through it. To love in this way of the son will cost us as it did him. And, everything is for sale for this kind of love: our reputation, our comfort, our security, our bodies, our possessions, our time, our years, our lives. It will cost us our lives as it did his. If the neighbor throws stones at your house or at your head, and you honestly say to him, 'My genuine love for you persists through your rejection, your persecution, and this pain.' He will say, 'What?! That is not possible!' It will be as the striving of that old romantic hero, Don Quijote, and his beloved, Dulcinea; nothing could be as devastating to her than the perseverance of his love. And in our case, it is an occasion for the neighbor, by this Love having reached him, to get a view of the Christ himself. It is an occasion for him to believe in the Christ (in Love) for himself.

Dear believer, don't you see the deep tenderness and love of God in making you more like his son? Don't you see how beautiful he is? He is the most beautiful forever. His sacrifice for you, the angels in heaven will never stop singing about it. We will never stop speaking of it and writing about it. Songs and poetry and art and statues cannot reflect one-tenth of its beauty. The glory and the beauty of it are as light that is too pure, too bright, too brilliant to look at directly.

And, are we so bored of it? Do we regard it so lightly? Are we so enchanted by politics or entertainment or our moralities: trying to judge ourselves and others, always doing what's 'right' or never doing what's 'wrong' or whatever else that we never get to communicating with each other about the person, Jesus, and his beauty, let alone putting that beauty on for ourselves? Granted, it is not a light thing. It is a terrible, awful, wonderful, glorious beauty. If we would just take the time to look at him, it would transform us. It would inspire us to wrap ourselves with such beauty; to put on Christ himself. Even though the process is, by virtue of what it is, terribly painful, it makes us beautiful in the eyes of God, even beautiful like his son.

That terrible beauty is an encouragement and an example to us while we wait for him to be with us in the fullness of that totally rapturous beauty and love.

“And this, so that I may know Him [experientially, becoming more thoroughly acquainted with Him, understanding the remarkable wonders of His Person more completely] and [in that same way experience] the power of His resurrection [which overflows and is

active in believers], and [that I may share] the fellowship of His sufferings, by being continually conformed [inwardly into His likeness even] to His death [dying as He did];”