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## INTRODUCTION

Today it has become commonplace among biblical scholars to speak of the importance of the Passion narrative in the Gospel. Each gospel writer gathered stories and sayings of Jesus treasured in the Church's memory. Some of their material had already been committed to writing; some still circulated by word of mouth. The gospel writers adapted the material to their particular audience.

Mark wrote to Christians under persecution. His readers were living in Rome around the traumatic time of the Jewish War (66-70 A.D.). To these Christians in conflict, Mark addressed his message about the Messiah who suffered and died before entering His glory.

The author of Matthew's gospel designed his work for Jewish-Christians living in Syria, probably in Antioch, about 80-90 A.D. His readers were struggling with their separation from the synagogue and their new associations with Gentiles within the Christian community. The gospel writer encouraged them to see the Church as the true people of God formed by Jesus, the New Moses.

About the same time, Luke wrote to Gentile Christians who had some affiliation with the Church at Antioch. His readers were coming to include more and more influential converts and were facing the

politics of the Roman Empire. Luke presents them with the message of salvation now offered to all, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, through Jesus.

Most likely about 90-100 A.D., the fourth evangelist composed his gospel. Ephesus remains the most likely place of origin. The readers of this gospel were seriously engaged in defending their claims about Jesus against Jewish objections. The evangelist addressed them with a spiritual gospel. He explains the theology of Jesus as the Son of God and the only way of salvation in order to strengthen their faith.

Although each writer composed his gospel for different people and with different purpose, there is one striking similarity in their works. Each devotes much attention to the story of the Passion. A quick glance at the outline of the written gospels reveals how much space is given over to telling the suffering and death of Jesus. In fact, the narration of Jesus' final days represents such a large part of the gospel that the Passion may even seem unduly emphasized. This fact is important.

The gospel writers could not forget those days of Jesus' suffering. They write their gospels bathed in the light of Easter Sunday morning. It is the Lord risen from the dead and living among the community of believers that they proclaim. Yet the dark shadows of Good Friday still fall clearly across the pages of their gospels. The Passion Story never lost its enthralling fascination even for the evangelists who had heard it many times before.

Scholars agree that, before the first evangelist put a pen in hand, the Passion narrative had already been written. The incidents from the public life of Jesus circulated for many years as independent stories. But, the Passion account was handed down as a well-organized and firmly established narrative. This would explain why the evangelists are more in agreement with each other in the Passion account than in any other part of the gospel.

No doubt the first preachers of the good news began by explaining how Jesus who is the Risen Lord came to His glory through suffering and death. They began with the Cross. This was the mystery that had to be proclaimed: God's giving salvation through the cruel death of His only-begotten Son (Acts 2: 22-40; Eph 1:3-10). Within the first generation of the Church's life, the Passion story took a vivid form. Whether it was for the instruction of catechumens or for the celebration of the Eucharist, the pattern of relating certain episodes in a definite order became fixed.

Certainly the place the Passion story occupies within the gospels and the priority of the narrative in the actual formation of the gospel tradition cannot be dismissed. From the very beginning, the Church has found nourishment for her life in meditating on the suffering and death of the Risen Lord. The community of believers has never let the memory of those last days fade. Despite the all too human instinct to

blot out pain, Christians have remembered the pain of Jesus.

The Cross was part of God's plan to bring Jesus to glory; and, it remains the instrument of our salvation. The Cross still speaks to the believer. For this reason, I offer the following biblical meditations on specific moments of the Passion narrative. In our own life, we are called to walk with Jesus in joy and in suffering. His Cross continues to enable us in every event of our life to discover God. And, as Paul says, it is the source of our salvation:

*The message of the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Cor 1:18)*

In the following meditations, we will reflect on some select moments in the Passion narrative. A deeper understanding of the events of Jesus' last days as recorded in Scripture can help us to see more clearly our own call to discipleship today.



*You were ransomed...not with perishable things like silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ as of a spotless unblemished lamb...known before the foundation of the world but revealed in the final time for you.*

*(1 Pt 1:18-20)*

## **CHAPTER 12**

### **THE LAMB OF GOD**

*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. (Jn 1:29)*

**T**he traveler who has reached the highest attainable summit of the Andes and stands in the pure, cloudless air can enjoy an almost boundless horizon. But whoever remains in the valley below amidst the haze and vapor must be satisfied with a lesser view. Much of the surrounding beauty escapes notice. So it is with all of us as we travel through this life. Dimness obscures the divine mercy and richness of God's love that surrounds us.

Yet, there is a way by which the Christian can gain a wider perspective. There is an elevation which we can climb that commands the boundless extent of God's love. It is Golgotha.

In Aramaic, "Golgotha" means skull. Legend has it that it was the burial ground of Adam. This is why artists often depict a skull at the foot of the Cross. On this spot, the new Adam rose above the first Adam. With the fourth evangelist as our guide, we can ascend that hill and, once our feet are firmly set upon its summit, we can let our eyes stretch to take in the view.

John helps us see what takes place on Calvary in three ways. He fixes our eyes on what is happening before us. He then stretches our gaze backward to past events that have led up to this moment. And finally, he invites us to peer into the future that will unfold in the world because of the Cross.

With John, we see Jesus dragging His cross up the hill. Unlike the other evangelists, John omits mentioning Simon of Cyrene who assists Jesus in carrying the Cross (Mk 15:21; Mt 27:32; Lk 23:26). John would have us take no notice of Simon. He wants us to realize that Jesus is in control of His own suffering and death. Jesus goes alone to the Cross. It is His choice. Remember Jesus' own words during His public ministry:

*This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father. (Jn 10:17-18)*

Willingly and not by force, the Good Shepherd sacrifices His life for His sheep.

After fixing our eyes on Jesus on His way to the Cross, with the swiftness of an eagle, John peers into the past and makes our glance travel across the many ups and downs of Israel's history to another hill. It is Mt. Moriah. There Isaac is carrying the wood for sacrifice (Gen 22:6). There Abraham, with

heavy steps, marks out each pace to the moment of sacrifice.

When his young and only son Isaac innocently questions his father, “*Where is the sheep for a burnt offering*” (Gen 22:7), the patriarch becomes prophet. Abraham replies, “*My son...God will provide himself the sheep for the burnt offering*” (Gen 22:8). In the actual events on Mt. Moriah, it was not a lamb, but a ram caught in the bushes that Abraham sacrificed to God in place of his own son. It is on Calvary that Abraham’s prophecy finds fulfillment. For God who did spare Isaac did not spare His only-begotten Son. He allowed Jesus to die on the Cross. John makes us remember this event by telling us that, at the very hour when the paschal lambs were being slaughtered in the temple, Jesus dies (Jn 19:14). Jesus is the lamb which God provides for our redemption. Jesus, indeed, is both the Good Shepherd who lays down His life and the pure lamb led to slaughter. Priest and victim are one in the perfect sacrifice of the Cross.

Finally, John makes our eyes race into the future. The soldier is thrusting his sharp sword into the side of Jesus “*and immediately blood and water flowed out*” (19:34). The blood proves that the lamb has been truly sacrificed. But, there is more. Jesus’ blood poured out for us from the Cross is His blood poured out for us in the Eucharist. Jesus, the Lamb of God, has become our food and drink in the Eucharist (Jn 6:51-58). In receiving Him, the true paschal lamb, we

pass over from the slavery of sin to the newness of grace, from death to life.

The water that flows from Jesus' pierced side symbolizes the gift of the Holy Spirit (Jn 7:37-39) who gives new life to us in Baptism (Jn 3:5-6). In the old creation, four rivers in the Garden of Eden ran towards the ends of the earth, giving life and bringing fruitfulness in their path (Gen 2:10-14). Now, in the new creation, there flows from the pierced side of Jesus the grace of redemption sweeping sin away and bearing the believer to Paradise.

