

THE PASSION OF CHRIST

by Louis Bourdaloue

Bourdaloue's celebrated meditations on the passion and death of Christ, delivered by the great 17th-century French Jesuit preacher sometimes called the 'king of preachers and the preacher of kings.

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The Passion of Christ

The Passion of Christ And there followed him a great company of people, and of women, which also bewailed and lamented him. But Jesus turning unto them, said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children."—Luke 23:27-28. The passion of Jesus Christ, however sorrowful and ignominious it may appear to us, must nevertheless have been to Jesus Christ Himself an object of delight, since this God-man, by a wonderful secret of His wisdom and love, has willed that the mystery of it shall be continued and solemnly renewed in His Church until the final consummation of the world. For what is the Eucharist but a perpetual repetition of the Savior's passion, and what has the Savior supposed in instituting it, but that whatever passed at Calvary is not only represented but consummated on our altars? That is to say, that He is still performing the functions of the victim anew, and is every moment virtually sacrificed, as though it were not sufficient that He should have suffered once; at least that His love, as powerful as it is free, has given to His adorable sufferings that character of perpetuity which they have in the Sacrament, and which renders them so salutary to us. Behold, Christians, what the love of God has devised; but behold, also, what has happened through the malice of men! At the same time that Jesus Christ, in the sacrament of His body, repeats His holy passion in a manner altogether mysterious, men, the false imitators, or rather base corrupters of the works of God, have found means to renew this same passion, not only in a profane, but in a criminal, sacrilegious, and horrible manner! Do not imagine that I speak figuratively. Would to God, Christians, that what I am going to say to you were only a figure, and that you were justified in vindicating yourselves to-day against the horrible expressions which I am obliged to employ! I speak in the literal sense, and you ought to be more affected with this discourse, if what I advance appears to you to be overcharged; for it is by your excesses that it is so, and not by my words. Yes, my dear hearers, the sinners of the age, by the disorders of their lives, renew the bloody and tragic passion of the Son of God in the world; I will venture to say that the sinners of the age cause to the Son of God, even in the state of glory, as many new passions as they have committed outrages against Him by their actions! Apply yourselves to form an idea of them; and in this picture, which will surprize you, recognize what you are, that you may weep bitterly over yourselves! What do we see in the passion of Jesus Christ? A divine Savior betrayed and abandoned by cowardly disciples, persecuted by pontiffs and hypocritical priests, ridiculed and mocked in the palace of Herod by impious courtiers, placed upon a level with Barabbas, and to whom Barabbas is preferred by a blind and inconstant people, exposed to the insults of libertinism, and treated as a mock king by a troop of soldiers equally barbarous and insolent; in fine, crucified by merciless executioners! Behold, in a few words, what is most humiliating and most cruel in the death of the Savior of the world! Then tell me if this is not precisely what we now see, of what we are every day called to be witnesses. Let us resume; and follow me.

Betrayed and abandoned by cowardly disciples; such, O divine Savior, has been Thy destiny. But it was not enough that the apostles, the first men whom Thou didst choose for Thine own, in violation of the most holy engagement, should have forsaken Thee in the last scene of Thy life;

that one of them should have sold Thee, another renounced Thee, and all disgraced themselves by a flight which was, perhaps, the most sensible of all the wounds that Thou didst feel in dying. This wound must be again opened by a thousand acts of infidelity yet more scandalous. Even in the Christian ages we must see men bearing the character of Thy disciples, and not having the resolution to sustain it; Christians, prevaricators, and deserters from their faith; Christians ashamed of declaring themselves for Thee, not daring to appear what they are, renouncing at least in the exterior what they have profest, flying when they ought to fight; in a word, Christians in form, ready to follow Thee even to the Supper when in prosperity, and while it required no sacrifice, but resolved to abandon Thee in the moment of temptation. It is on your account, and my own, my dear hearers, that I speak, and behold what ought to be the subject of our sorrow. A Savior mortally persecuted by pontiffs and hypocritical priests! Let us not enter, Christians, into the discussion of this article, at which your piety would, perhaps, be offended, and which would weaken or prejudice the respect which you owe to the ministers of the Lord. It belongs to us, my brethren, to meditate to-day on this fact in the spirit of holy compunction; to us consecrated to the ministry of the altars, to us priests of Jesus Christ, whom God has chosen in His Church to be the dispensers of His sacraments. It does not become me to remonstrate in this place. God forbid that I should undertake to judge those who sustain the sacred office! This is not the duty of humility to which my condition calls me. Above all, speaking as I do, before many ministers, the irreprehensible life of whom contributes so much to the edification of the people, I am not yet so infatuated as to make myself the judge, much less the censor of their conduct. But though it should induce you only to acknowledge the favors with which God prevents you, as a contrast, from the frightful blindness into which He permits others to fall, remember that the priests and the princes of the priests, are those whom the evangelist describes as the authors of the conspiracy formed against the Savior of the world, and of the wickedness committed against Him. Remember that this scandal is notoriously public, and renewed still every day in Christianity. Remember, but with fear and horror, that the greatest persecutors of Jesus Christ are not lay libertines, but wicked priests; and that among the wicked priests, those whose corruption and iniquity are covered with the veil of hypocrisy are His most dangerous and most cruel enemies. A hatred, disguised under the name of zeal, and covered with the specious pretext of observance of the law, was the first movement of the persecution which the Pharisees and the priests raised against the Son of God. Let us fear lest the same passion should blind us! Wretched passion, exclaims St. Bernard, which spreads the venom of its malignity even over the most lovely of the children of men, and which could not see a God upon earth without hating Him! A hatred not only of the prosperity and happiness, but what is yet more strange, of the merit and perfection of others! A cowardly and shameful passion, which, not content with having caused the death of Jesus Christ, continues to persecute Him by rending His mystical body, which is the Church; dividing His members, which are believers; and stifling in their hearts that charity which is the spirit of Christianity! Behold, my brethren, the subtle temptation against which we have to defend ourselves, and under which it is but too common for us to fall! A Redeemer reviled and mocked in the palace of Herod by the impious creatures of his court! This was, without doubt, one of the most sensible insults which Jesus Christ received. But do not suppose, Christians, that this act of impiety ended there. It has passed from the court of Herod, from that prince destitute of religion, into those even of Christian princes. And is not the Savior still a subject of ridicule to the libertine spirits which compose them? They worship Him externally, but internally how do they regard His maxims? What idea have they of His humility, of

His poverty, of His sufferings? Is not virtue either unknown or despised? It is not a rash zeal which induces me to speak in this manner; it is what you too often witness, Christians; it is what you perhaps feel in yourselves; and a little reflection upon the manners of the court will convince you that there is nothing that I say which is not confirmed by a thousand examples, and that you yourselves are sometimes unhappy accomplices in these crimes.

Herod had often earnestly wished to see Jesus Christ. The reputation which so many miracles had given Him, excited the curiosity of this prince, and he did not doubt but that a man who commanded all nature might strike some wonderful blow to escape from the persecution of His enemies. But the Son of God, who had not been sparing of His prodigies for the salvation of others, spared them for Himself, and would not say a single word about His own safety. He considered Herod and his people as profane persons, with whom he thought it improper to hold any intercourse, and he preferred rather to pass for a fool than to satisfy the false wisdom of the world. As His kingdom was not of this world, as He said to Pilate, it was not at the court that He designed to establish Himself. He knew too well that His doctrine could not be relished in a place where the rules of worldly wisdom only were followed, and where all the miracles which He had performed had not been sufficient to gain men full of love for themselves and intoxicated with their greatness. In this corrupted region they breathe only the air of vanity; they esteem only that which is splendid; they speak only of preferment: and on whatever side we cast our eyes, we see nothing but what either flatters or inflames the ambitious desires of the heart of man.

What probability then was there that Jesus Christ, the most humble of all men, should obtain a hearing where only pageantry and pride prevail? If He had been surrounded with honors and riches, He would have found partisans near Herod and in every other place. But as He preached a renunciation of the world both to His disciples and to Himself, let us not be astonished that they treated Him with so much disdain. Such is the prediction of the holy man Job, and which after Him must be accomplished in the person of all the righteous; "the upright man is laughed to scorn." In fact, my dear hearers, you know that, whatever virtue and merit we may possess, they are not enough to procure us esteem at court. Enter it, and appear only like Jesus Christ, clothed with the robe of innocence; only walk with Jesus Christ in the way of simplicity; only speak as Jesus Christ to render testimony to the truth, and you will find that you meet with no better treatment there than Jesus Christ. To be well received there, you must have pomp and splendor. To keep your station there, you must have artifice and intrigue. To be favorably heard there, you must have complaisance and flattery. Then all this is opposed to Jesus Christ; and the court being what it is—that is to say, the kingdom of the prince of this world—it is not surprizing that the kingdom of Jesus Christ can not be established there. But wo to you, princes of the earth! Wo to you, men of the world, who despise this incarnate wisdom, for you shall be despised in your turn, and the contempt which shall fall upon you shall be much more terrible than the contempt which you manifest can be prejudicial. A Savior placed upon a level with Barabbas, and to whom Barabbas is preferred by a blind and fickle rabble! How often have we been guilty of the same outrage against Jesus Christ as the blind and fickle Jews! How often, after having received Him in triumph in the sacrament of the communion, seduced by cupidity, have we not preferred either a pleasure or interest after which we sought, in violation of His law, to this God of glory! How often divided between conscience which governed us, and passion which corrupted us, have we not renewed this abominable judgment, this unworthy preference of the creature even above our God!

Christians, observe this application; it is that of St. Chrysostom, and if you properly understand it, you must be affected by it. Conscience, which, in spite of ourselves, presides in us as judge, said inwardly to us, "What art thou going to do? Behold thy pleasure on the one hand, and thy God on the other: for which of the two dost thou declare thyself? for thou canst not save both; thou must either lose thy pleasure or thy God; and it is for thee to decide." And the passion, which by a monstrous infidelity had acquired the influence over our hearts, made us conclude—I will keep my pleasure. "But what then will become of thy God," replied conscience secretly, "and what must I do, I, who can not prevent myself from maintaining His interests against thee?" I care not what will become of my God, answered passion insolently; I will satisfy myself, and the resolution is taken. "But dost thou know," proceeded conscience by its remorse, "that in indulging thyself in this pleasure it will at last submit thy Savior to death and crucifixion for thee?" It is of no consequence if He be crucified, provided I can have my enjoyments. "But what evil has He done, and what reason hast thou to abandon Him in this manner?" My pleasure is my reason; and since Christ is the enemy of my pleasure, and my pleasure crucifies Him, I say it again, let Him be crucified.

Behold, my dear hearers, what passes every day in the consciences of men, and what passes in you and in me, every time that we fall into sin, which causes death to Jesus Christ, as well as to our souls! Behold what makes the enormity and wickedness of this sin! I know that we do not always speak, that we do not always explain ourselves in such express terms and in so perceptible a manner; but after all, without explaining ourselves so distinctly and so sensibly, there is a language of the heart which says all this. For, from the moment that I know that this pleasure is criminal and forbidden of God, I know that it is impossible for me to desire it, impossible to seek it, without losing God; and consequently I prefer this pleasure to God in the desire that I form of it, and in the pursuit that I make after it. This, then, is sufficient to justify the thought of St. Chrysostom and the doctrine of the theologians upon the nature of deadly sin.... That there are men, and Christian men, to whom, by a secret judgment of God, the passion of Jesus Christ, salutary as it is, may become useless, is a truth too essential in our religion to be unknown, and too sorrowful not to be the subject of our grief. When the Savior from the height of His cross, ready to give up His spirit, raised this cry toward heaven, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" there was no one who did not suppose but that the violence of His torments forced from Him this complaint, and perhaps we ourselves yet believe it. But the great Bishop Arnauld de Chartres, penetrating deeper into the thoughts and affections of this dying Savior, says, with much more reason, that the complaint of Christ Jesus to His Father proceeded from the sentiment with which He was affected, in representing to Himself the little fruit which His death would produce; in considering the small number of the elect who would profit by it; in foreseeing with horror the infinite number of the reprobate, for whom it would be useless: as if He had wished to proclaim that His merits were not fully enough nor worthily enough remunerated; and that after having done so much work He had a right to promise to Himself a different success in behalf of men. The words of this author are admirable: Jesus Christ complains, says this learned prelate, but of what does He complain? That the wickedness of sinners makes Him lose what ought to be the reward of the conflicts which He has maintained; that millions of the human race for whom He suffers will, nevertheless, be excluded from the benefit of redemption. And because He regards Himself in them as their head, and themselves, in spite of their worthlessness, as the members of His mystical body; seeing them abandoned by God, He complains of being abandoned Himself: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He complains of what made St. Paul groan when,

transported with an apostolic zeal, he said to the Galatians: "What, my brethren, is Jesus Christ then dead in vain? Is the mystery of the cross then nothing to you? Will not this blood which He has so abundantly shed have the virtue to sanctify you?" But here, Christians, I feel myself affected with a thought which, contrary as it appears to that of the apostle, only serves to strengthen and confirm it. For it appears that St. Paul is grieved because Jesus Christ has suffered in vain; but I, I should almost console myself if He had only suffered in vain, and if His passion was only rendered useless to us. That which fills me with consternation is, that at the same time that we render it useless to ourselves, by an inevitable necessity it must become pernicious; for this passion, says St. Gregory of Nazianzen, "partakes of the nature of those remedies which kill if they do not heal, and of which the effect is either to give life or to convert itself into poison; lose nothing of this, I beseech you." Remember, then, Christians, what happened during the judgment and at the moment of the condemnation of the Son of God. When Pilate washed his hands before the Jews and declared to them that there was nothing worthy of death in this righteous man, but that the crime from which he freed himself rested upon them, and that they would have to answer for it, they all cried with one voice that they consented to it, and that they readily agreed that the blood of this just man should fall upon them and upon their children. You know what this cry has cost them. You know the curses which one such imprecation has drawn upon them, the anger of heaven which began from that time to burst upon this nation, the ruin of Jerusalem which followed soon after—the carnage of their citizens, the profanation of their temple, the destruction of their republic, the visible character of their reprobation which their unhappy posterity bear to this day, that universal banishment, that exile of sixteen hundred years, that slavery through all the earth—and all in consequence of the authentic prediction which Jesus Christ made to them of it when going to Calvary, and with circumstances which incontestably prove that a punishment as exemplary as this can not be imputed but to decide which they had committed in the person of the Savior; since it is evident, says St. Augustine, that the Jews were never further from idolatry nor more religious observers of their law than they were then, and that, excepting the crime of the death of Jesus Christ, God, very far from punishing them, would, it seems, rather have loaded them with His blessings. You know all this, I say; and all this is a convincing proof that the blood of this God-man is virtually fallen upon these sacrilegious men, and that God, in condemning them by their own mouth, although in spite of Himself, employs that to destroy them which was designed for their salvation.

But, Christians, to speak with the Holy Spirit, this has happened to the Jews only as a figure; it is only the shadow of the fearful curses of which the abuse of the merits and passion of the Son of God must be to us the source and the measure. I will explain myself. What do we, my dear hearers, when borne away by the immoderate desires of our hearts to a sin against which our consciences protest? And what do we, when, possess of the spirit of the world, we resist a grace which solicits us, which presses us to obey God? Without thinking upon it, and without wishing it, we secretly pronounce the same sentence of death which the Jews pronounced against themselves before Pilate, when they said to him, "His blood be upon us." For this grace which we despise is the price of the blood of Jesus Christ, and the sin that we commit is an actual profanation of this very blood. It is, then, as if we were to say to God: "Lord, I clearly see what engagement I make, and I know what risk I run, but rather than not satisfy my own desires, I consent that the blood of Thy Son shall fall upon me. This will be to bear the chastisement of it, but I will indulge my passion; Thou hast a right to draw forth from it a just indignation, but nevertheless

I will complete my undertaking.”

Thus we condemn ourselves. And here, Christians, is one of the essential foundations of this terrible mystery of the eternity of the punishment with which faith threatens us, and against which our reason revolts. We suppose that we can not have any knowledge of it in this life, and we are not aware, says St. Chrysostom, that we find it completely in the blood of the Savior, or rather in our profanation of it every day. For this blood, my brethren, adds this holy doctor, is enough to make eternity not less frightful, but less incredible. And behold the reason: This blood is of an infinite dignity; it can therefore be avenged only by an infinite punishment. This blood, if we destroy ourselves, will cry eternally against us at the tribunal of God. It will eternally excite the wrath of God against us. This blood, falling upon lost souls, will fix a stain upon them, which shall never be effaced. Their torments must consequently never end. A reprobate in hell will always appear in the eyes of God stained with that blood which he has so basely treated. God will then always abhor him; and, as the aversion of God from His creature is that which makes hell, it must be inferred that hell will be eternal. And in this, O my God, Thou art sovereignly just, sovereignly holy, and worthy of our praise and adoration. It is in this way that the beloved disciple declared it even to God Himself in the Apocalypse. Men, said he, have shed the blood of Thy servants and of Thy prophets; therefore they deserve to drink it, and to drink it from the cup of Thine indignation. “For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink.” An expression which the Scripture employs to describe the extreme infliction of divine vengeance. Ah! if the blood of the prophets has drawn down the scourge of God upon men, what may we not expect from the blood of Jesus Christ? If the blood of martyrs is heard crying out in heaven against the persecutors of the faith, how much more will the blood of the Redeemer be heard!

Then once more, Christians, behold the deplorable necessity to which we are reduced. This blood which flows from Calvary either demands grace for us, or justice against us. When we apply ourselves to it by a lively faith and a sincere repentance, it demands grace; but when by our disorders and impieties we check its salutary virtue, it demands justice, and it infallibly obtains it. It is in this blood, says St. Bernard, that all righteous souls are purified; but by a prodigy exactly opposite, it is also in this same blood that all the sinners of the land defile themselves, and render themselves, if I may use the expression, more hideous in the sight of God.

Ah! my God, shall I eternally appear in thine eyes polluted with that blood which washes away the crimes of others? If I had simply to bear my own sins, I might promise myself a punishment less rigorous, considering my sins as my misfortune, my weakness, my ignorance. Then, perhaps, Thou wouldst be less offended on account of them. But when these sins with which I shall be covered shall present themselves before me as so many sacrileges with respect to the blood of Thy Son; when the abuse of this blood shall be mixed and confounded with all the disorders of my life; when there shall not be one of them against which this blood shall not cry louder than the blood of Abel against Cain; then, O God of my soul! what will become of me in thy presence? No, Lord, cries the same St. Bernard affectionately, suffer not the blood of my Savior to fall upon me in this manner. Let it fall upon me to sanctify, but let it not fall upon me to destroy. Let it fall upon me in a right use of the favors which are the divine overflowings of it, and not through the blindness of mind and hardness of heart which are the most terrible punishments of it. Let it fall upon me by the participation of the sacred Eucharist, which is the precious source of it, and not by the maledictions attached to the despisers of Thy sacraments. In fine, let it fall upon me by influencing my conduct

and inducing the practise of good works, and let it not fall upon me for my wanderings, my infidelities, my obstinacy, and my impenitence. This, my brethren, is what we ought to ask to-day from Jesus Christ crucified. It is with these views that we ought to go to the foot of the cross and catch the blood as it flows. He was the Savior of the Jews as well as ours, but this Savior, St. Augustine says, the Jews have converted into their judge. Avert from us such an evil. May He Who died to save us be our Savior. May He be our Savior during all the days of our lives. And may His merits, shed upon us abundantly, lose none of their efficacy in our hands, but be preserved entire by the fruits we produce from them. May He be our Savior in death. And at the last moment may the cross be our support, and thus may He consummate the work of our salvation which He has begun. May He be our Savior in a blest eternity, where we shall be as much the sharer in His glory as we have been in His sufferings.

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