

LESSON 1

JESUS' PASSION

AGONY IN THE GARDEN



Introduction

In Christian tradition, Jesus' Passion refers to the suffering that leads to his death. It begins with the Last Supper and continues with his agony and betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane, his trial before Pontius Pilate, his scourging at the pillar, and his carrying of the cross; it culminates with Jesus' crucifixion and death. The Church relives Jesus' Passion each year in the Triduum liturgies of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. These same events are depicted in the movie *The Passion of the Christ*. The word "Christ" used in the title of the film comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah, which means "anointed." This name is applied to Jesus because he perfectly fulfills the divine mission of Savior foretold by the Old Testament prophets. The Bible itself is the primary source of evidence about Jesus Christ, and it's also the primary source for the

movie *The Passion of the Christ*. Not every event depicted in the film occurs in Scripture. Filmmakers took creative license to portray some situations as they might have happened, for example, the flashback scenes of Jesus' life in Nazareth. The focus of this study is the biblical basis for the Passion events portrayed in the movie, and the first lesson looks at Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Of utmost importance is the reason that the Son of God willingly underwent such extreme suffering, foretold by the prophet Isaiah about 500 years before the birth of Jesus. The movie opens with Isaiah's messianic prophecy concerning the "suffering servant": "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed" (*Isa 53:5*).



Matthew 26:36-54

26 ³⁶ Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here, while I go over there and pray.” ³⁷ And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸ Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.” ³⁹ **And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, “My Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou will.”** ⁴⁰ And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour? ⁴¹ Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” ⁴² Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” ⁴³ And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴ So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. ⁴⁵ Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand.” ⁴⁷ While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the Twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and elders of the people. ⁴⁸ Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I shall kiss is the man; seize him.” ⁴⁹ And he came up to Jesus at once and said, “Hail, Master!” And he kissed him. ⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, “Friend, why are you here?” Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. ⁵¹ And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear. ⁵² And Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. ⁵³ Do you not think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? ⁵⁴ But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?”

[Please Note: One of the best ways to meditate on God’s Word is through memorization. A suggested memory verse is always highlighted in the Scripture text, or you may choose a verse of your own.]

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John 18: 1-14

18 ¹When Jesus had spoken these words, he went forth with his disciples across the Kidron valley, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. ²Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place; for Jesus often met there with his disciples. ³So Judas, procuring a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons. ⁴Then Jesus, knowing all that was to befall him, came forward and said to them, “Whom do you seek?” ⁵They answered him, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus said to them, “I am he.” Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. ⁶When he said to them, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground. ⁷Again he asked them, “Whom do you seek?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” ⁸Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he; so, if you seek me, let these men go.” ⁹This was to fulfill the word which he had spoken, “Of those whom you gave me I lost not one.” ¹⁰Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s slave and cut off his right ear. The slave’s name was Malchus. ¹¹Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the chalice which the Father has given me?” ¹²So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews seized Jesus and bound him. ¹³First they led him to Annas; for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. ¹⁴It was Caiaphas who had given counsel to the Jews that it was expedient that one man should die for the people.

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VOICES OF THE SAINTS

God is the principal efficient cause of man’s salvation. But since Christ’s humanity is the instrument of his divinity, all Christ’s acts and sufferings work instrumentally in virtue of his divinity in bringing about man’s salvation.

—St. Thomas Aquinas, known as the “Angelic Doctor”

Opportunities for Additional Study

Points to Ponder

Matthew 26:36-54; John 18:1-14

He Was Wounded for Our Transgressions

The movie *The Passion of the Christ* opens with a quote from Isaiah 53:5: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.” This prophecy, written about 500 years before the birth of Jesus, foretells the redemptive suffering through which the Messiah would accomplish his mission as Savior of the world. This is the central message of the New Testament.

It’s also the theme of the film *The Passion of the Christ*, which opens with a depiction of Jesus praying in eerie moonlight in the Garden of Gethsemane. Three of his disciples—Peter, James, and John—sleep nearby. The words of Jesus’ prayers are translated into English along the bottom of the movie screen: “Hear me, Father.” “Rise up, defend me.” “Save me from the traps they set for me.” “Shelter me, O Lord.” “I trust in you.” “In you I take refuge.” Moviegoers familiar with the Old Testament will recognize that this language repeats ideas about God as a supreme protector that are found in many of the Psalms, especially Psalms 71 and 91.

In Psalm 71:1-4, the author begins with this entreaty to God: “In you, O LORD, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame! In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me, and save me! Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress. Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel man.” Psalm 91:1-4 praises God’s behavior toward the person who loves him: “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, who abides in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the LORD, ‘My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.’ For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover

you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.” Jesus’ prayers indicate his total trust in God the Father, as well as a clear understanding of the evil nature of the forces with which he’s contending.

The Garden of Gethsemane and the Garden of Eden

Although the Gospel writers make no mention of the presence of Satan in the Garden of Gethsemane, Scripture is clear about the devil’s previous efforts to tempt Jesus (*Mt* 4:1-11, *Mk* 1:12-13, and *Lk* 4:1-13). Luke observes that “when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time” (*Lk* 4:13), indicating that Satan planned to return later to tempt Jesus again. In the film *The Passion of the Christ*, Satan appears during Jesus’ anguish and insists that no one can bear the full burden of sin. Jesus falls on his face in prayer, and Satan unleashes a serpent that slithers ominously toward Jesus’ head. In one of the most dramatic scenes in the movie, Jesus rises and stomps the serpent underfoot.

The rich symbolism of this action is rooted in Scripture and connects the events taking place in the Garden of Gethsemane with Adam and Eve’s fall into original sin in the Garden of Eden. Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament, records God’s words to the serpent, who’d tempted the first humans to sin: “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (*Gen* 3:14-15). The “seed” of the woman represents both humankind and Jesus, who as the “Son of man” is representative of all humanity. When Jesus crushes the serpent, he foreshadows his final victory over the devil and over sin and death.

The sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, is called original sin, and as a result all humanity inherits a natural tendency toward sin. The

devil continues to try to tempt humans to sin, just as he tempted Adam and Eve, by making sin appear glamorous and desirable. Human sin is rooted in pride, anger, envy, greed, lust, gluttony, and laziness—the seven capital or “deadly” sins. Satan advertises sin as something that will be liberating for men and women, but the reality is the direct opposite—all sin is enslaving.

‘Why Is This Night Different from Every Other Night?’

The Gospel of John describes the Incarnation as “the Word became flesh” (*Jn* 1:14), and the Church teaches that in the mystery of the Incarnation, the Son of God assumed a human nature in order to accomplish the salvation of all men and women. Although the early Church fought against many heresies that denied the true divinity and true humanity of Jesus Christ, belief in the Incarnation remains the distinctive sign of Christian faith. In his First Letter, John writes that God “loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins” (*1 Jn* 4:10).

Jesus’ willingness to suffer and die in order to free men and women from their enslavement to sin is critical to understanding the meaning of his Passion, which is the fulfillment of the Jewish Passover. This connection to the Passover is introduced in the movie *The Passion of the Christ* in a scene in which the Blessed Virgin Mary awakens in the middle of the night and asks: “Why is this night different from every

other night?” Mary Magdalene replies: “Because once we were slaves, and we are slaves no longer.” That question-and-answer exchange is part of the ritual observed at the beginning of the Seder meal celebrating the Jewish feast of Passover.

The Church refers to Jesus’ work of redemption as the Paschal mystery, associating his saving death and its memorial in the sacrament of the Eucharist with the Paschal lamb slain at the first Passover.

Before Moses led the descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel out of bondage, the ancient Hebrews were required to sprinkle the blood of a lamb on their doorposts as a sign for God to “pass over” their homes during the tenth plague, the death of all the first-born in Egypt (*Ex* 12:1-14). The original Passover that preceded the Exodus out of Egypt is a foreshadowing of Jesus’ death on the cross. The blood of Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God, is shed for all men and women. Jesus begins his Passion by celebrating the feast of Passover with his disciples, and transforming that Jewish memorial into the Church’s celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist.

The result of Jesus’ Paschal sacrifice is that men and women now receive his body and his blood each time they participate in the celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist. It’s through this participation in the Mass that the people of God are liberated from slavery to sin and death and are given a share in eternal life.

Catechism Connections

- CCC 385 urges Christians to approach the question of the origin of evil by fixing eyes of faith on Jesus Christ, who alone conquers evil, sin, and death.
- CCC 443 describes the difference between the way that Jesus taught his disciples to address God in prayer and the way that he himself addresses God the Father.
- CCC 607 teaches that the desire to embrace God’s plan of redeeming love inspired Jesus’ entire life, and that his redemptive Passion was the very reason for his Incarnation.
- The Messiah’s characteristics are revealed above all in the “Servant songs” that proclaim the meaning of Jesus’ Passion and show how he’ll pour out the Holy Spirit to give life to the many. To learn more about Jesus as the “suffering servant,” see CCC 713.
- In CCC 2340, the Church teaches that the means for resisting temptation consist of self-knowledge, ascetical practices, obedience to God’s commandments, exercise of moral virtues, and fidelity to prayer.
- It’s through prayer that Jesus vanquishes the tempter, both at the outset of his public mission and in the ultimate struggle of the agony of his Passion. To learn more, see CCC 2849.



ROME TO HOME

Pope John Paul II encouraged Christians, armed with God’s grace, to persevere in the battle against “the ruler of this world.”

The Second Vatican Council declared itself very clearly on this subject: “The whole of man’s history has been the story of our combat with the powers of evil, stretching, so our Lord tells us, from the very dawn of history until the last day. Finding himself in the midst of the battlefield, man has to struggle to do what is right, and it is at great cost to himself, and aided by God’s grace, that he succeeds in achieving his own inner integrity.” In another passage the Council expresses itself still more explicitly, speaking of the struggle “between good and evil” which is fought out in every person: “Man finds that he is unable of himself to overcome the assaults of evil successfully, so that everyone feels as though bound by chains.” But to this strong expression the Council sets out in juxtaposition the truth about redemption with an affirmation of faith no less strong and decisive: “The Lord himself came to free and strengthen man, renewing him inwardly and casting out ‘the ruler of this world’ (Jn 12:31), who held him in bondage of sin.”

—General Audience, December 10, 1986

4. The movie *The Passion of the Christ* uses creative license to depict a fifth figure in the Garden of Gethsemane with Jesus and his three disciples. All four of the Gospels describe the devil tempting Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. What details does Luke include in his account and elsewhere in his Gospel that imply Satan also might have been present in the Garden of Gethsemane to tempt Jesus again (see *Lk* 4:1-13 and *Lk* 22:3-4)? What does the Church teach regarding the existence of Satan (see CCC 2851)?

5. During the agony in the Garden, Satan is depicted in the movie *The Passion of the Christ* as unleashing a serpent that slithers toward Jesus. Jesus' response is to stomp on this serpent. How does this symbolically relate events in the Garden of Gethsemane to the account of the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (see *Gen* 3:14-15 and CCC 410)? In his First Letter to the Corinthians, how does St. Paul emphasize this connection (see *1 Cor* 15:22)?

6. **And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, "My Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou will."** In Matthew 26:39 (our suggested memory verse), what "chalice" is Jesus talking about (see CCC 612)? How is this chalice related to Old Testament prophecies (see *Isa* 51:17 and *Ezek* 23:31-34)?

10. John 18:10 recounts the way that Peter, in his attempt to protect Jesus, cuts off the high priest's servant's ear. Some additional information about this incident is provided in the Gospel of Luke. What did Jesus do other than admonish Peter (see *Lk* 22:50-51)? What words of Jesus in response to this incident are recorded in Matthew's Gospel (see *Mt* 26:52)?

Summary

In this lesson, we observed that:

1. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah foretold a Messiah who would be “wounded for our transgressions,” and Jesus is that “suffering servant” of God.
2. Jesus goes to the Garden of Gethsemane with his disciples to pray.
3. Jesus tells Peter, James, and John that his soul is sorrowful, even to death, and he asks the three disciples to watch and pray—but they fall asleep instead.
4. Jesus agony in the Garden is based on his knowledge of the suffering and death he's to endure, and Satan tries to tempt Jesus to abandon trying to save the souls of all humankind.
5. The first biblical hint of a Savior occurs in Genesis 3:15 when God tells the serpent in the Garden of Eden that the “seed” of the woman will bruise his head; Jesus is the “seed” of the woman.
6. Jesus prays that if it's possible, God allow him to avoid the suffering to come, but nevertheless Jesus remains totally obedient to his Father's will.
7. Judas arrives with soldiers and officers of the chief priests and Pharisees, and he betrays Jesus with a kiss.
8. Peter cuts off the ear of one of the high priest's slaves.
9. Jesus restores the slave's injury and warns that those who live by the sword will perish by the sword.
10. Jesus' Passion is a fulfillment of the original Old Testament Passover in which the blood of a lamb was used as a sign for death to “pass over” the homes of God's chosen people, the descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel.