

“The Garden of Passion”

One summer, a mother gave her young son the opportunity he had been begging for. As she prepared her backyard family garden, she marked off a small area. It would be her ten-year-old's own personal garden. He was excited. He was in charge. He made perfect rows, wide enough to fit his gardening tools in between so he could rake away the weeds. He even fixed the empty seed packets to a stake at the end of each row to identify what was planted there—just as he saw his mother do. However, as that summer progressed, his diligence in caring for the garden waned. Despite his mother's warnings, his garden lay neglected. By late in the growing season, the garden had become so thick with weeds it was hard to discern if any good plants had grown among them. The only way to salvage whatever vegetables might be entangled in that mess was to get down on his hands and knees for hours and weed the whole thing by hand. It was a good lesson, not about gardening itself, but about how God had cursed the ground in the Garden of Eden. Maybe you're like me, and even if this story isn't quite your experience, you've seen how difficult weeds can be and how quickly they spring up.

But more than just weeds have sprung up from the Garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve were tempted, sin sprang up from that garden. From sin sprang death, suffering, sadness, damnation, God's stern disapproval, and Satan's dominion. These poisonous weeds flourished and completely smothered whatever life God originally intended for his people. There was no salvaging it. Every weed would have to be pulled up and destroyed, lest it spread and regain its stranglehold.

Jesus eradicated these weeds by becoming one of us and taking our place. He allowed himself to be choked, as it were, by all of the weeds together. Tonight we read of another garden, the Garden of Gethsemane. In this garden we clearly see Christ's true suffering. We might call it the Garden of Passion, as in the Passion History that we've been reading. *Passion* means “suffering.”

We read from Luke chapter 22:

Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. On reaching the place, he said to them, “Pray that you will not fall into temptation.” He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. (verses 39-44)

Jesus' suffering was at least in part because he knew what was going to happen to him. He knew he was going to die. Does death frighten you or at least make you uncomfortable? It does because death is not natural. We were not created to die. We were created to live. Death is the opposite of God's original intention for us. That's what makes death so horrifying to us. Imagine how much dread you'd feel if you knew your death was coming tomorrow morning. Jesus knew he was going to have to die in place of all people of all time. He knew it was coming soon. How appalling! How revolting to the Author of Life! Prior to this he had never known death. It would be a first-time experience for him too!

It's bad enough that death is frightening. It would be even worse if death were bitter. What if you had to die unfairly? Let's suppose you were accused of a crime. You knew the guilty party, but they were released and you were held for the death penalty. Doesn't it irk you when someone blames you for something you didn't do? Don't we often expend a lot of energy to justify ourselves in the eyes of others? Imagine how much more bitter Jesus' death must have been, since he was taking the blame for everything that everyone else ever did wrong. It wasn't just another person blaming Jesus but God the Father: God's infinite white hot anger focused only on Jesus. Though Jesus could have claimed innocence, God was not understanding or lenient. God the Father came down hard on Jesus and allowed no justification, no excuse. For Jesus it had to be truly a bitter death.

There was no way out for Jesus, since God's plan was to uproot sin and death from the whole world. His plan was to give us life. As God the Son, only Jesus could be everyone's substitute. Only he could endure such suffering and shoulder such immense responsibility. Only he could carry such a heavy weight, sink so low, and still come out on top. In the Garden of Gethsemane, we see the uncompromising will of the Almighty and the colossal momentum of the world's guilt in a gigantic supernatural collision crushing down on a frail human frame.

Feel sorry for Jesus? Please don't. He wouldn't want you to. And that's not the point of observing his great suffering. Sweat like great drops of blood was not a sign of Christ's unwillingness but of his resolve. That is why the angel arrived to bolster him so he could finish the job.

Only by suffering in the flesh could Jesus rescue all flesh from suffering. Only his bodily death would force death to release our bodies forever. Only if God the Son were punished as a human could all humanity be set free from God's punishment. Only if our sins were placed on the Son of Man could the sins of all mankind be atoned for.

Our 10 year old boy might be appalled to see what had become of his neglected garden. Tugging at weeds would be an arduous and unpleasant task. But he would ultimately be laboring only for himself. Christ suffered not for himself but for you and me. Don't feel sorry for him. Understand that his most earnest desire, his every toilsome effort, heaving sigh, and wincing pain was for our benefit. Don't feel sorry for him. Be appalled at how impossibly weedy our existence had become that it required this degree of toil for him to free us from it all. Be grateful, more than words can say, that he would consciously, intentionally go to it for you.

On the person of Jesus, all the weeds—sin, death, damnation, sorrow, Satan's power—have run their course. They did their worst on him. But the cross was the end of their growing season so that now they are nothing but dried, lifeless remnants blown away by the wind or tossed into a fire. Through faith in Jesus we are planted in a new garden, a weedless garden, an evergreen, always blooming garden. Trusting in him, our sins are forgiven. Death is gone. Sorrow is turned to joy. Satan has no power over us. Hell is forced to release its claim on us. God has nothing but the friendliest, most loving goodwill toward us. The weeds are gone. Life is renewed unhindered, unhampered, and uninterrupted.

Sometimes we're struck with an alarming realization: The roots of our sins run pretty deep. We can try to yank them out and change for the better, but the root is still there. It keeps coming back. Sometimes we are secretly alarmed at ourselves—how grotesque or how appalling or how often repeated our personal sins are. We never dare to tell another living soul. It's too embarrassing, too painful. No one would ever look at us the same again if they knew. But look again at Christ, your Savior, in the Garden of Passion. Look at the intensity of his suffering. Remember, that was just the beginning of his suffering! Be assured, from there he proceeded to the cross, and he suffered such severity as to more than make up for your worst, most embarrassing, most often repeated sins. He suffered such hellish depths of divine rage—he the very Son of the eternal God—so that his atoning payment to God on your behalf is infinitely greater than your sin. That's why the apostle Paul was able to write, and why you can say right along with him, "For that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life" (1 Ti 1:16). In Christ, you are forgiven! Completely forgiven! Even for those unspeakable sins at your root and core—forgiven!

See Jesus in this dreadful Garden of Passion. Be appalled at his suffering for your sake. Then cherish his suffering as your dearest treasure, and love him more than you can say with words! Amen.