

**ISAIAH 53:5.** (EHV)

But it was because of our rebellion that he was pierced.  
He was crushed for the guilt our sins deserved.  
The punishment that brought us peace was upon him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.

Two Sundays ago we considered Christ's active obedience—how from his conception to his death, Jesus actively fulfilled God's law in our place and supplied the righteousness, holiness, and perfection that we could not win.

Today we want to consider Christ's passive obedience or passion. During Lent we always have a Passion History reading every Wednesday, in which we progress through Jesus's passion. The phrases "Jesus's passion" and "Passion History" are often misunderstood. When you say about yourself, "I have a passion for accounting *or* for history *or* for physical fitness *or* for farming *or* for helping others," what you mean is that you greatly enjoy doing or studying those things and you feel fulfilled doing them. But when we talk about Jesus's passion or passive obedience, we are not primarily referring to his feelings, though his feelings are certainly involved. Both *passion* and *passive* come from the same Latin word meaning *to suffer*. That is the focus of Jesus's passion and passive obedience—his suffering.

Jesus suffered throughout his life. But he especially suffered toward the end of his life when he was arrested, put on trial, condemned, and crucified. And it was through this suffering that Jesus completed his saving mission in obedience to God the Father.

First we want to consider the *history* of Christ's passive obedience, then we want to consider the *theology* of Christ's passive obedience, or the What does this mean?

**1. The History of Christ's Passive Obedience**

We heard two Sundays ago that Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his ministry, around the year 29 AD. Since the Gospel of John explicitly mentions three different Passover celebrations during Jesus's ministry, we know his ministry lasted at least three years. Thus it was around 33 AD that Jesus's passion or suffering began. During that roughly three-year period, Jesus incurred the increasing ire of the Jewish leaders, because Jesus tore down their self-righteousness and condemned their sinful hearts. Instead of repenting like Jesus wanted, they plotted how they might rid Jesus from the scene.

Meanwhile, the larger political scene had also become very volatile. From secular historians we know that Tiberias Caesar had left Rome to go and live on the island of Capri, and had put Sejanus, who he thought was one of his most trusted men, in his place. But Sejanus did not want to serve Tiberias; he wanted to replace him when he was gone. Sejanus was also incredibly anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish, and one of the territorial governors appointed around the time Sejanus took over for Tiberias, a governor who shared his anti-Semitism, was a man whose name you might recognize—Pontius Pilate. Together Pilate and Sejanus were hoping to make the lives of the Jews miserable, and possibly even eradicate them.

But Sejanus was living on borrowed time with all of his intrigues. Eventually Tiberias found out about Sejanus's treachery and had him put to death in October of 31 AD. In his suspicion and insecurity, he then went on a tirade, putting to death anyone in power that he knew to be in cahoots with Sejanus. When he also found out about Sejanus's anti-Jewish plans, he sent

messages to all of his governors telling them to treat the Jews kindly and fulfill their wishes as much as possible. So by the time the Jewish leaders succeeded in arresting Jesus and putting him on trial, Pontius Pilate was in a tight spot. He himself hated the Jewish people that he ruled, but he knew that if he did anything that was perceived as anti-Semitic, he would lose his job and possibly his life. The Jewish leaders knew this and used it to their advantage.

But the plans of the Jewish leaders still might not have succeeded if an unexpected key player had not entered the picture—Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus’s own disciples. Judas was the treasurer of the group, but at some point his love for money had taken a more important place in his heart than his love for Jesus. He would help himself from the disciples’ treasury. When that extra income wasn’t enough, he approached the Jewish leaders and offered to betray Jesus to them for money. They paid him thirty pieces of silver, and he made arrangements with them.

On Holy Thursday evening around 33 AD, Jesus celebrated his final Passover on earth with his disciples in Jerusalem. During that meal, he instituted the Lord’s Supper, which we will consider in an upcoming sermon. At some point during the meal, Jesus indicated to Judas that he knew he was going to betray him and dismissed him from the meal. Judas left and let the Jewish leaders know that Jesus would be in the Garden of Gethsemane later that evening, one of Jesus’s favorite places.

And Jesus did go there with his disciples after the meal. There Jesus’s intense passion or suffering began, as he realized what was ahead of him and prayed to the Lord that, if there were any other way possible for him to accomplish his mission, that he might go that route instead. His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. But when Jesus saw Judas coming with a crowd of soldiers, guards, and chief priests, he knew that the hard road was the only way.

When the soldiers and chief priests arrived, Jesus asked them to let his disciples go, and they all fled from him. Jesus then went with the soldiers and chief priests and was put on trial before the Jewish ruling council at the house of the high priest. After a number of false witnesses had given conflicting testimony, the high priest asked Jesus flatly if he was the Christ, the Son of God. When Jesus said yes, they accused him of blasphemy and condemned him to death.

Now the abuse really started. They spit in his face, punched him, slapped him, and made fun of him. They then tied him up and brought him to Pilate early in the morning, probably around 5 a.m. Pilate initially sent him to King Herod, but Herod was unable to get any information out of Jesus. Herod and his soldiers ridiculed him, mocked him, mockingly dressed him in an elegant robe, and sent him back to Pilate.

Pilate then interrogated him, and when he found no basis for any charge against him, tried to get Jesus freed by giving the Jewish leaders a choice between freeing Jesus or another notorious criminal. But they asked for the notorious criminal to be freed and Jesus to be crucified. Pilate then tried to gain sympathy for Jesus by having him flogged with a whip, crowned with thorns, clothed in a purple robe, and struck in the face, but it was to no avail. When Pilate kept dragging his feet, the Jews finally pulled out their political trump card by making a veiled threat to report Pilate to Caesar, and that sealed it. Pilate finally handed Jesus over to be crucified around 9 a.m. on Friday.

Jesus then carried either the cross-piece for his cross, or the entire cross, out to the place where he would be crucified. (He actually wasn’t able to make it the whole way, so the soldiers made a man named Simon carry it for him.) Once they arrived at the execution site, they stripped

Jesus and nailed his hands and feet to the cross, before hoisting the cross into place. Now physically speaking, Jesus could have been affected by any number of factors—shock, blood loss, infection, dehydration. But there were also psychological factors he had to deal with there. People were hurling insults at him and mocking him from below, and even one of the criminals hanging on the other side of him was mocking him, not to mention the humiliating public exposure. In addition, darkness came over the whole land from noon to 3 p.m., which certainly didn't help to brighten any moods.

But that wasn't the worst. The worst is reflected in the words Jesus spoke around 3 p.m., not long before he died: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Remember how we talked on Trinity Sunday about how God is one and is the most simple being there is, because you cannot divide him into any component parts? So how could God the Father forsake God the Son? I don't know, but it happened. As Jesus bore the sins of the whole world, he had to endure the punishment of hell there on the cross, being forsaken by God the Father. He had to endure the eternal suffering that all people deserved in the span of just a few hours. We can only imagine what the pain was like before Jesus finally said, "It is finished," bowed his head, and gave up his spirit not long after 3 p.m. And at that moment there was an earthquake.

## **2. The Theology of Christ's Passive Obedience**

That's the history. Now what about the theology, the What does this mean? I actually already alluded to it, because the two really can't be separated. Our theology is based on historical events, especially on this one; without history, our theology is useless. What happened as Jesus was hanging there is summed up so terribly and beautifully in Isaiah 53:5: "It was because of our rebellion that he was pierced. He was crushed for the guilt our sins deserved. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."

This is a terrible sermon and it is beautiful sermon. It is law, and it is gospel.

What is the law? The law is that what Jesus suffered was what we should have suffered. The Jewish leaders and Pontius Pilate played a physical role in putting Jesus on the cross, but it was really you and I and all people who put him there. Brothers and sisters, can we please stop using the phrase, "I'm not perfect"? I'm guilty of it too, and we all need to stop using it. Because even though it sounds true and it is true on the surface, the way we usually use that phrase is when we want to compare ourselves to someone else in a favorable light, but do so with a semblance of humility. "Now I know I'm not perfect either, *but...*", followed by what so-and-so has done.

No. Isaiah tells us that with every wound Christ received, we should be seeing what we deserved for our sins, whether it's the wounds inflicted by thorns, punches, slaps, whips, or nails, or the wounds inflicted by words, whether it's the physical wounds, the psychological wounds, or the deepest spiritual wound of being forsaken by God. The account of Jesus's crucifixion could just as well be preached under the theme, "What is hell like?" Isaiah describes it as being pierced, crushed, punished, wounded. These are not pleasant words. No, friends, it isn't just that we're not perfect. God knows not only our naturally sinful condition, but also every sin we have committed in deed, word, and thought. Jesus was punished as a criminal, because that's what each of us are before God—criminals deserving of hell.

But it is also a beautiful sermon, because what is the gospel? The gospel is that this hell was suffered by Jesus in our place. “It was because of *our* rebellion that *he* was pierced. *He* was crushed for the guilt *our* sins deserved. The punishment that brought *us* peace was upon *him*, and by *his* wounds *we* are healed.” That last part in Hebrew literally reads, “By his wounds, it has been healed for us.” What has been healed for us? Our sin. Jesus paid for it all. Jesus took it all away.

We have any number of terms for this. *Vicarious atonement*—*vicarious* means that Jesus is our vicar or substitute and that he has made us “at one”—*atonement*—with God. *Vicarious satisfaction*—again *vicarious* means that Jesus is our substitute and that he has made satisfaction for us. *Satisfaction* comes from a Latin word and means that Jesus has “done enough” for us to win God’s favor and eternal life for us. We use appeasement terms like *propitiation*, which means that Jesus has rendered us favorable to God. We use payment terms like *expiation* and *redemption*, which mean that Jesus has paid the full price for us, to cleanse us from sin—expiation—and to make us his own—redemption.

But the term that Luther and Lutherans returned to again and again is *justification*, a courtroom term, and one that Isaiah also uses here: “By his knowledge my just servant will justify the many.” To *justify* means to declare innocent or not guilty. Jesus has won our justification by taking our guilt on himself and then, too, taking our punishment. If all of our crimes are on his record, and if our punishment for all of them has already been served and paid, then in God’s courtroom we are truly innocent of all sin, righteous, not guilty.

This doctrine is the heart and soul of Scripture, and so it is also the heart and soul of our Christian and Lutheran faith. All our other doctrines and teachings flow into this one, or flow out of this one, or revolve around this one, that for the sake of Christ’s holy life and his innocent suffering and death, for the sake of Christ’s active obedience and his passive obedience, God has declared us not guilty of all sin. There is nothing left we need to do to earn God’s favor. It is impossible for us to make him happier with us or more favorably disposed toward us than Jesus has already made him. “By his wounds it has been healed for us.”

Countless passages throughout the Scriptures underscore this truth. “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103). “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (1 Peter 3). “The One who had no experience with sin God made to be sin for us, so that we in turn might become the righteousness of God in him” (2 Corinthians 5). “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3). This doctrine, this historical fact, is what separates Christianity from all other religions, and Luther’s goal was, and our goal as his religious descendants still is, to be the ones who preach it and teach it most clearly. God grant that we may do so, and that we may also believe it. Amen.