

Did Christ Have to Suffer? Or Could Man Have Been Saved Another Way?

By Paul Thigpen

Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* stirred sharp controversy. One debate focused on the bloodiness of the movie. Critics complained that the scenes of Christ's torture and death were too grisly. Defenders replied that the historical event being portrayed was in fact grisly, so the portrayal could not be sanitized if it was to remain faithful to the subject matter.

For both opponents and supporters, the film has served as a reminder that Jesus' Passion was a horrifying affair. And for at least some Christians, the ghastly violence of the movie has raised a significant issue: Did Christ *have* to suffer as he did to accomplish our salvation? Or could that purpose have been achieved another way?

It's an age-old question. Sixteen centuries ago, when Augustine addressed the matter, he noted that he was not the first person even back then to discuss it. "There are those," the bishop wrote, "who say, 'What? Did God have no other way to free men from the misery of this mortality? No other way than to will that the only-begotten Son . . . should become man by putting on a human soul and flesh, becoming mortal so he could endure death?'"

Then, as now, Christians seemed to face a dilemma. If God could have made salvation possible for us some other way, why would he choose the way of so much blood, so much pain, so much agony? Wouldn't something less frightful have been better?

To some observers, there are only two possibilities here: If the Crucifixion was the only means God could find to redeem us, then he must be limited in his power and wisdom. Surely an almighty, all-wise deity could have found a better way!

On the other hand, if God *preferred* choosing a horrible death for his own Son over other options, then he must be wicked. How could he possibly will such a thing if he could have fulfilled his purposes otherwise?

In some ways, it's a variation on the question long familiar to Christians: If God is all-powerful, all-wise, and all-good, then why is there suffering in the world?

Typically, Augustine and other Doctors of the Church who followed his thought, such as Thomas Aquinas, saw right through the dilemma. They challenged the notion that, in light of Christ's Passion, Christians serve a God who must be either a bumbling wimp or a repulsive sadist. No, they insisted: Our God is indeed all-powerful, all-wise, and all-good. But we must examine more closely, ponder more deeply, the true nature of divine power, wisdom, and goodness, as these attributes are revealed in the terrifying Passion of our Lord.

No other way?

To address the issue, Augustine and Aquinas first tackled the question about alternative divine strategies. Was there no other possible way to accomplish our salvation than the Passion of Christ?

Both saints were both firm on this matter: They insisted that God is God, and his wisdom and might know no bounds. Of *course* he could have found another way to save us.

Augustine summed it up this way: "Other possible means were not lacking on God's part, because all things are equally subject to his power" (*On the Trinity* 8:10). When examining the question many centuries later, Aquinas quoted Augustine and added scriptural support: "It was possible for God to deliver mankind otherwise than by the Passion of Christ," he concluded, "because *nothing shall be impossible for God* (cf. Luke 1:37)."

Aquinas admits that some scriptural texts seem to say God had no choice in the matter (cf. *Summa Theologiae* 3:46:2). On several occasions in the Gospel accounts, Jesus himself spoke this way. For example, after declaring Peter to be the "rock," our Lord said to the disciples: "The Son of Man *must* suffer many things . . . and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Luke 9:22, emphasis added).

Again, as Jesus walked with two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus, on the evening of the day he had risen from the dead, he rebuked the men for their lack of faith: "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not *necessary* that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:25–26, emphasis added).

Necessary under certain conditions

Nevertheless, as Aquinas pointed out, there's a difference between being *absolutely* necessary and being necessary *given certain conditions*. In the case of Jesus' Passion, by the time Christ had come into the world, certain crucial conditions were already in place: God the Father had already ordained that this was the way our salvation would be accomplished. And his foreknowledge of these events had already been manifested in divine revelation to the prophets and recorded in Scripture.

Given these conditions, Aquinas concluded, it was correct for Christ to say that he *must* suffer, that it was *necessary*, because at that point the matter was already settled: What the Father ordained could not be avoided, and what he foreknew could not be mistaken. As our Lord put it at the Last Supper, "The hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. For the Son of Man goes *as it has been determined*" (Luke 22:21–22, emphasis added).

This conclusion is strengthened when we observe that Christ's statement on the Emmaus road was made with reference to Old Testament prophecies. (See also his words on the day of his ascension, Luke 24:44–46.) God had chosen the way—he had revealed it to the prophets—so this was how it had to be. We can see then that rather than implying some limit to God's power (as if he couldn't have chosen otherwise), these scriptural passages actually *affirm* God's power and sovereignty.

This is not to say, of course, that Christ was somehow forced into such a terrible fate. Some have tried to deduce that meaning from passages such as Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane to have the "cup" of suffering removed (cf. Luke 22:42). But the truth is that, from before all time, God the Son had lived in perfect union with God the Father: "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). Together they had willed our redemption and determined that, in order to accomplish it, he would come to earth and suffer for us.

It's true that in Gethsemane we hear Christ crying out as his human nature recoils in horror at the prospect of such awful suffering. But even then, our Lord wanted above all what the Father wanted: "Not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42). As the writer of Hebrews reminds us, Jesus "endured the cross" not because he was forced to do so, but rather "for the joy that was set before him" (Heb. 12:2)—winning the victory he had come to achieve.

A choice both good and fitting

Because of his sovereign power, Augustine and Aquinas thus concluded, God could have found another way to save us. But Christ's making satisfaction for the penalty of our sins through suffering was in fact the way God chose to make possible our salvation. Given this reality, we should examine it more closely to discern some reasons that it would be in accordance with the Father's perfect wisdom and love.

Recall the dilemma we described earlier. If we hold that God could have chosen an alternative means to our salvation, then we seem to be left with a disturbing conclusion: God must be wicked to have willed such suffering for his Son. How could he have done such a thing when he had other options?

Against such objections, Augustine wrote, "We assert that the way in which God deigned to deliver us by the man Jesus Christ, who is mediator between God and man, is both good and befitting the divine dignity. . . . There neither was nor need have been any other means more suitable for healing our misery" (*On the Trinity* 8:10).

How could this be? What was good and fitting about Christ's Passion? The bishop continued: "For what else could have been so necessary to build up our hope, and to free the minds of mortals despairing because of their mortality, than that God should show us how highly he valued us, and how greatly he loved us? And what could be more clear and evident proof of God's great love than that the Son of God . . . so undeserving of evil, should bear our evils?" (ibid.).

Many of the Christians who have viewed Mel Gibson's film report that it brought them to tears to realize what our Lord did for us. More than ever before, they have been made aware of just how

high a price was paid by God the Son—and God the Father—to save us. They have been inspired to a stronger faith in God's love and a firmer hope in his desire to bring them to heaven.

Augustine would not have been surprised at their response. He was certain that anyone who meditated for long on Christ's Passion would experience the same overwhelming sense of faith and hope. The Father had no greater gift to give us than his Son, the bishop insisted—and that's precisely the gift he gave.

As Paul had put it long before: "If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?" (Rom. 8:31–32).

Inspired to love

Aquinas developed this line of thought more thoroughly. He noted that our reconciliation with God and becoming like him requires more than simple forgiveness. He wrote that, in the Passion, "many other things besides deliverance from sin came together for man's salvation."

First, he observed, Christ's Passion moves us not only to have faith and hope in God, as Augustine had pointed out; it also motivates us to a grateful *love* for God. "By this, man knows how much God loves him, and is thus stirred to love him in return. In this loving response lies the perfection of human salvation. That is why the apostle says, 'God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom. 5:8)."

Our salvation isn't complete without our learning to love as God loves. So in Christ's Passion, said Aquinas, we aren't simply pardoned. We are given a convincing reason to devote our whole hearts to God.

More reasons that the Passion was fitting

Yet there is more. Christ's suffering doesn't just move us to respond in love. It shows us *how* to love in a world that is broken.

The means God used to redeem us, Aquinas continued, tells us what we ourselves must do to love as God loves in the face of natural and moral evil. Christ "set us an example of obedience, humility, constancy, justice, and the other virtues displayed in his Passion, which are also necessary for man's salvation. Thus it is written: 'Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps' (1 Pet. 2:21)."

If we are to grow up into "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13), then we must imitate him. The Passion shows us most clearly what attitudes and actions we are to imitate. "Have this mind among yourselves," wrote Paul, "which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God . . . humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:5–6, 8). The Passion demonstrates that love is costly to God, and it will be costly to us as well.

A great reward

A third reason God ordained that the Passion would take place is that, through it, Christ merited a great reward. Since Christ humbled himself so extravagantly, Paul added, "therefore God has highly exalted him" (Phil. 2:9).

Aquinas quoted Augustine's comment on these words of the apostle, adding his own remarks: "Augustine says, 'The humility of the Passion merited glory, and glory was the reward of humility' (*Tractate on John* civ). But he was glorified, not merely in himself, but also in his faithful ones, as he himself says: 'I am glorified in them' (John 17:10)" (ST 3:48:1). Because Christ is the head of the Church, his merit overflows to the members of his body. So Christ shares his reward with us as justifying grace and the glory of blessedness in heaven.

Aquinas insisted that a fourth reason God sent his Son to suffer is that it created what can be seen as a debt to Christ's holiness. When we recognize the debt, we see ourselves obligated to pay it by avoiding evil—and that avoidance contributes to our salvation. Because of the Passion, then, "man is all the more bound to refrain from sin, according to 1 Corinthians 6:20: 'You were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body'" [reference needed].

A boost to human dignity

Finally, both Augustine and Aquinas concluded that God ordained the Passion of Christ "because it redounded to humanity's greater dignity" (ST 3:46:4). Of course, to simply have God become man in the Incarnation was an honor beyond all telling. But in Christ's suffering, our race was granted more honor still.

How could that be? Aquinas wrote: "Just as man was overcome and deceived by the devil, so also it should be a man who should overthrow the devil. And since man deserved death, so it should be a man who, by dying, vanquishes death. That is why it is written: 'Thanks be to God, who has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 15:57)"

The human race had been left in bondage to sin, death, and the devil by the Fall. So it was a fitting irony—a kind of poetic justice on God's part—to use a member of that race to conquer sin, death, and the devil. The tables were turned; the roles were reversed; the victor was vanquished. Satan, who had fallen away from God through pride, was humiliated.

We might still be tempted to ask: If God wanted Christ, as a representative of mankind, to defeat Satan, and Christ had available to him all the power of God, why couldn't Christ simply crush the devil in combat? Why submit himself to such torment?

In addition to the reasons we've already noted, Augustine offered this one: "The devil was to be conquered not by the power of God but by his righteousness. . . . For the devil, through the fault of his own perversity, had become a lover of power and a forsaker and assailant of righteousness. . . . So it pleased God that, in rescuing man from the grasp of the devil, the devil should be vanquished not by power but by righteousness. In the same way men, imitating Christ, should seek to conquer the devil by righteousness, not by power" (*On the Trinity* 13:13).

In a sense, then, righteousness is itself a kind of might, but a higher kind than brute force. So it was more fitting that God should use the higher kind of might against an enemy whose perverse strategy was to use the lower kind. Righteousness thus defeated raw power.

Everlasting glory and grace

In all these ways Augustine and Aquinas concluded that God's decision to have Christ suffer to save us was good and wise. Aquinas wrote: "It was more fitting that we should be delivered by Christ's Passion than simply by God's good will." Augustine summed it up this way: "Why, then, shouldn't the death of Christ come to pass? Why shouldn't an all-powerful God have decided against innumerable other ways to free us in order to choose this death? For in this death, nothing was lost of Christ's divine nature, and from the human nature he took for himself, how great a benefit was bestowed on us men!"

The everlasting glory of the way of salvation the Father chose far outweighs the horrors his Son had to endure—and the resulting grace overflows in abundance to us all.

Paul Thigpen is the editor of The Catholic Answer, a national bimonthly magazine of catechesis and apologetics. His most recent book is entitled Daily Passion: Forty Reflections on Christ's Last Twelve Hours (Xulon, 2004).