

The Passion Of Christ And The Suffering Of God

JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN

HUMAN SUFFERING AND THE GOD-QUESTION

Meaningless, unremitting, endless suffering leads people to cry out for God and to despair of God. Both faith in God and atheism have their deepest roots in such suffering. But what are we crying out for in our pain? Some ask the question about God theoretically: *How can God allow this?* They have the impression that God is an unfeeling, blind power that rules destiny and cares for no one. God doesn't care about the death of children in Iraq and in Latin American slums. He doesn't do anything about it. People get this impression of God when they themselves are in danger of becoming that way: unaffected, cold, and indifferent in the face of suffering. The question, "How can God allow that?" is an observer's question. It is not the question asked by those affected.

I remember in July, 1943, watching bombs rain down all around me in my hometown, Hamburg; 80,000 people were killed in one week as a result of that bombing. Somehow, miraculously it would seem, I survived unscathed. To this day I do not know why I am not dead like my comrades. My question in that inferno was not, "Why is God letting this happen?" but rather, "God, where are you?" *Where is God?* Is he far away from us, absent, in his heaven, or is he the Sufferer among the suffering? Does he share in our suffering? Does our suffering affect him? On the one hand we have the theoretical question about justifying God in the face of suffering (theodicy

Jürgen Moltmann presented this lecture at Asbury Theological Seminary's annual Ryan Lectureship on November 5, 1992. He is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Protestant Faculty of the University of Tübingen.

question) and on the other hand, the existential question about whether God shares in our suffering. The first question presupposes a dispassionate, apathetic God; the second question reflects the search for a compassionate God, one who suffers with us.

With these questions in mind, we will now turn to the core of the Christian faith: The gospel of the crucified Christ. We will advance in three steps:

1. We want to "see" what actually happened in Christ's Passion. Leaving all prejudices aside, we will delve into Christ's experience of God in Gethsemane and on the cross.
2. We then want to learn to "judge" and to ask about the "theology of the cross."
3. Lastly, we want to "act and suffer" with certainty. We will ask about the consolation that the crucified God brings us in our suffering, and about following the cross in this world.

THE PASSION OF CHRIST

At the center of the Christian faith we find a story: *The story of the Passion of Jesus Christ*. This must be interpreted literally, that is to say taking into account both meanings of the word "passion": The story of Christ is the story of a great passion, of a passionate love; for that very reason, it is also a story about deadly anguish.

At the center of Christian faith we find the *suffering of a passionate Christ*. Thus, the story of the Passion has both an active and a passive side.

In the past Christ's passionate side, which leads him to suffer, was often overlooked. The man of sufferings (*Ecce Homo*) was turned into a prototype for silent acquiescence to a sad destiny.

Today, the suffering that is part and parcel of every great passion is all too often overlooked. We want to be painlessly happy and repress suffering. By doing so we anesthetize pain and rob ourselves of our feelings. Life without passion is a poor life indeed.

We will stop at two stations of Christ's Passion and try to determine what happened there: at Gethsemane and at Golgotha.

Gethsemane

The story of the Passion does not begin with Christ's capture and torture by the Roman soldiers. It starts much earlier. Indeed, it begins in the province of Galilee, the moment Christ decides to go with his disciples to Jerusalem—to the center of power, of injustice, and of Roman violence. His passion for the Kingdom of God, for healing the sick, for liberating the oppressed, for forgiving sin, is bound to run up in Jerusalem against its bitterest enemies: the collaborationists amongst his own people and the forces of Roman occupation. His entrance into Jerusalem was triumphal. The people gathered together and shouted: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" (Mark 11:9-10). This helps clarify why the keepers of the order, who feared a popular insurrection, were made nervous by him.

The man from Nazareth had become dangerous. That was why he had to disappear, quickly and without causing a stir.

Up to this point our story is in itself not all that remarkable. Many brave men and women, many freedom fighters, have gone with open eyes to their deaths for the liberation of their people.

In Christ's death, however, something different is present, something that is initially incomprehensible. During the night, before the Romans arrested him, he went to the Garden of Gethsemane. He took three of his friends with him and "began to tremble and to be deeply troubled," as Mark puts it. Matthew reports: "he began to be sorrowful and troubled." One might say, "He was desperate." "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he says, and asks his friends to stay and keep watch with him.

On previous occasions Christ had also withdrawn at night in order to be one with God in prayer. Now, for the first time, he does not want to be alone with God. He seeks protection among his friends. Protection from what, from whom? Then, sounding like a demand, comes his prayer: "Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me" (Mark 14:36). In other words: spare me this suffering. Which suffering? In Matthew and Luke this comes across more modestly: "If it is possible" and "if you are willing," may this cup be taken from me.

This entreaty of Christ was not granted by God, his Father. Elsewhere it is always "I and the Father are one," yet here the fellowship of Christ with God seems shattered. That is why Christ's friends, as if paralyzed by grief, fall deeply asleep. The unity of Christ with the God of his life and his passion is only upheld in this separation through the self-overcoming "nevertheless": "yet not my will, but yours be done." With this silence, begins his true Passion, his *suffering because of God*. To be sure, simple, human dread of pain is also present. It would be cruel to state that as God's Son Christ felt no fear. It would also be foolish, however, to take him to be an overly sensitive weakling who fell into self-pity in the face of bodily torments and impending death.

I believe that an entirely different fear had taken hold of Christ and was tearing at his soul: the fear that he, the only begotten Son who loved the Father as no one had ever loved him before, could be "forsaken" by the Father. He does not fear for his life. He fears for God. He fears for the Father's Kingdom, the good news about which he had announced to the poor.

This *suffering because of God* himself is the actual torment in Christ's Passion. His godforsakenness is the cup which does not pass from him. God's awful silence in the moment of Christ's prayer at Gethsemane is more than the silence of the dead. Mystics have experienced "the dark night of the soul" in which everything which makes life alive dries up, and hope disappears from life. Martin Buber called this "The eclipse of God."

Who can stay awake in God's darkness? Who would not be paralyzed by it? Jesus' friends are spared from the horror by falling deeply asleep. Luke, the physician, and other witnesses speak of "sweat like drops of blood" which fall to the ground as Christ prays. In the Luther translation of the Bible, this section is

entitled "The struggle in Gethsemane." Struggle with what, with whom? Christ's struggle with himself? The struggle with death? I believe it is more than all of that. It is Christ's struggle with his experience of God. Therein lies his agony. He was able to endure this agony through his sacrifice.

Golgotha

We find the other story at the conclusion of Christ's Passion at the place of execution named Golgotha. Once again there is a prayer; or, more exactly, a desperate cry out to God. Toward the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) and then, with a loud cry, he died.

For three hours he hung, nailed to the cross, apparently waiting silently for death in a state of near-paralysis due to his wounds. And then he dies with a cry that expresses the deepest abandonment by the God on whom he had set all his hope and for whom he is hanging on the cross. This must be the hard kernel of historical truth in the story of Golgotha. The thought that the Son's last word to God, his Father, could be "You have forsaken me"—this thought could have never taken root in Christian tradition had these terrible words not been spoken and had Jesus not died with a loud cry. We will never be able to get used to the fact that in the center of the Christian faith is this cry of the godforsaken Christ out to God. On the contrary: as already becomes clear in the New Testament and then in the history of the Church, we attempt to weaken the consequences of his words and to replace them with more "pious" parting words. And yet, as frightening as Christ's death cry is, we dimly feel that it is important, yes, even crucial for our lives, for it is the shout which so many tortured people can join into, which expresses their true situation: "My God, why have you forsaken me?"

These words are not easier to accept because they are found at the beginning of Psalm 22. The idea that the dying Jesus prayed the entirety of Psalm 22 at the cross is misleading. For one thing, that psalm ends with a wonderful prayer of gratitude for salvation from deadly distress, something which did not happen at the cross; for another, crucified people were not capable of speech after a short time. No, this is indeed the cry to God of someone who has been abandoned. Some ancient manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark say it even more strongly: "Why have you cursed me?" Even the letter to the Hebrews, written much later, safeguards this memory: "So that apart from God (literally: without God) he might taste death for everyone" (Heb. 2:9).

What Christ feared, what he struggled with in Gethsemane, about which he beseeched the Father, did not pass him by, but rather occurred on the cross: Christ bears the godforsakenness in which no one can take another's place, in which each person is alone, which no one can endure.

Is there an answer to the question why God forsook him? The gospel says it happened "for us," in order for him to become the Brother of all godforsaken people, that he might bring them to God.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the story of Christ's Passion. At the heart of the Passion is the godforsaken Christ's experience of God. Is this the end of all human belief in God or is it the beginning of a faith reborn, a faith in God which nothing can shake?

The passionately loving Christ, the persecuted Christ, the lonely Christ, the tortured Christ, the Christ who suffered at the silence of God, this Christ is our Brother, the Friend which can be trusted with everything, because he knows and has suffered everything that may come our way—and more than that. But where is God? If he is only absent in the story of Christ's Passion, then we would have to say: Christ, *certainly*, I understand him, he understands me—but a God who abandons him, *by no means!*

THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

Christ died with the cry: "My God, why have you forsaken me?" and any theology calling itself Christian must attempt to find an answer to Christ's question. But is there really an answer to this question? Aren't Christian theologians often like Job's friends, who want to explain his sufferings to him, although he does not want to be consoled? We will now examine several questions which arise upon consideration of Christ's cross and his experience of godforsakenness.

Why did God forsake Christ on the cross?

We find a first answer to this question in Paul and John: God gave him over "for us"; God did it out of love for us. Paul argues in the following way: the God who raised Christ from the dead is the same God who "gave him up" to death on the cross. In the forsakenness of the crucified Christ, who shouts: "My God, why?" Paul already hears the answer: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32). Was that also Christ's own will? Paul says it was, and speaks of "the Son of God" who "gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). Did God sacrifice his "own Son" and let him die alone, suffering on the cross? In that case God would be not only an apathetic God, but also a cruel one. No, says Paul; for when Christ the Son of God suffered *dying*, the Father of Jesus Christ suffered the death of his only beloved Son. If the Son dies godforsaken on the cross, the Father also suffers the forsakenness of the Son. Thus they both suffer, but not in the same way: Christ suffers *dying*, God suffers the death of his Son. The *Passion of Christ* also affects God himself and becomes the *Passion of God*. Paul also expresses this in the well-known phrase: "God was in Christ and reconciled the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). If God the Father was in Christ the Son, then the sufferings of Christ are also God's sufferings and God also experiences death in Christ's cross. How should one imagine that God is the one who *delivers* Christ to a godforsaken death and yet at the same time is also the one who *exists* "in Christ" and is present there? Paul gives no explanation of this paradox. However, an old Jewish story can help us to come close to this mystery:

"When the Holy One, praised be He, comes to free the Children of Israel from their exile, they will say to him: Lord of the world, You are the one who scattered us amongst the peoples by banishing us from our Land, and You wish to lead us back there? And the Holy One, praised be He, will say to the Children of Israel: When I saw that you were leaving my Land, I also left it, in order to be able to come back to it with you." (E. Wiesel, *Der mitleidende Gott [The Compassionate God]*)

God goes with us, he suffers with us. Therefore, wherever Christ the Son of God goes, the Father goes with him. In the Son's sacrifice we can therefore also recognize the sacrifice of God; otherwise it would not be possible for the Gospel of John to say, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). In the forsakenness of the Son, the Father also forsakes himself, he leaves his Heaven and is in Christ, in order to be the Father of all the forsaken on earth.

Christ dies with a shout directed to God, who he feels has forsaken him. Where is God in the events at Golgotha? He is *in* the dying Christ. There are many answers to the question of "why," none of them completely adequate. The question of "where" is more important; its answer is Christ himself.

Why did God take on Christ's Suffering?

What is the meaning of the horrible events at Golgotha? There are two answers to this question:

- 1) The *solidarity of God* with us (in other words, Golgotha happened in order for God to be *with us* in our suffering and in our pain);
- 2) *Substitutionary atonement* (in other words, Golgotha happened in order for God to be there *for us* in our guilt, to free us from its burden).

The Christology of Solidarity: Christ our Brother

The Gospels tell of the Passion of Christ as the story of Christ's ever-deeper emptying of himself. His male disciples flee after his arrest by the Romans, one of them betrays him, one denies him—and Christ loses his identity as their master. The priests of his people hand him over to the Romans—and Christ loses his identity as a Jew. Pilate has him tortured and destroys his body. He is killed as an "Enemy of Mankind" by the Roman Empire, which claims to be humanity's representative—and Christ loses his life. The hymn in Philippians summarizes this kenotic progression as follows:

He made himself nothing, taking the very form of a servant...he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:7-8).

If God goes where Christ goes, if God himself was in Christ, then Christ brings God's fellowship to those who have been as humiliated and made to be nothing as he was. The cross of Christ stands among the countless crosses—from Spartacus to the concentration camps to the hungry and "disappeared" in Latin America—which line the way of the powerful and the violent.

The *sufferings of Christ* are not exclusively his sufferings, but rather are *inclusively* our sufferings and the sufferings of this time. His cross stands in a brotherly way amongst our crosses, as a sign that God himself participates in our sufferings and he himself bears our pains. The "suffering Son of Man" has become so very much one of us that the countless, nameless tortured and forsaken people in the world are his brothers and sisters. That was the conversion experience of the 59-year-old Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero in San Salvador: "In the crucified peoples of history, the crucified God came close to him....In the eyes of the poor and the oppressed he beheld the disfigured countenance of God" (Jon Sobrino).

Christ entered into this humiliation and forsakenness in order to become the Brother of those who are humiliated and forsaken, and to bring them the Kingdom of God. He does not help them through supernatural miracles, but rather by virtue of his suffering through his wounds. "Only the suffering God can help us," wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his death cell. God always helps first of all through his suffering with us: "Even in hell you are there." Therefore no suffering can separate us from our fellowship with the God who suffers with us. The God of Jesus Christ is the God of solidarity with those who are victimized and those who suffer.

The Christology of Substitutionary Atonement: Christ the Saviour

From early on, the Christian community interpreted the Passion of Christ as the divine substitutionary atonement for the sins of the world. In accordance with the prototype of the "suffering servant of Yahweh" in Isaiah 53, Christ was seen as the Son of God who reconciled the world to God through his representative suffering. How should this be understood? Is the atonement necessary at all? I believe it is. In his book *The Sunflower*, Simon Wiesenthal tells how, as a prisoner in a concentration camp, he was called to the deathbed of an SS man who wanted to confess to him, as a Jew, asking him for forgiveness for having been involved in mass killings of Jews. Wiesenthal was able to listen to the man's confession but could not forgive him, for no one can forgive murderers in the name of their dead victims. This story makes it clear that atonement is necessary in order to be able to live with such a great burden of sin. Without forgiveness of their sins, the guilty cannot live and cannot die, for they lose all self-respect. There can be no forgiveness of sin without an atonement for sin—yet this is not a human possibility, for the injustice which has taken place cannot be "repaired" by any human action. Is, on the other hand, atonement for human sin a *divine* possibility?

Among the cults of many cultures one finds the sacrifice of animals as a way of softening the wrath of the gods which has been aroused by human injustice. In Israel it was different—certainly, in the Old Testament a sacrifice for sin also existed. It was the so-called "scapegoat," given by God so the sins of the people could be passed onto it and sent out to the wilderness, so as to take the sins away from the people. The "scapegoat" is not offered to God in order to appease his

wrath; rather, God provides the “scapegoat” in order to reconcile the people unto himself. In Solomon’s Temple there were also similar expiation rituals. According to the vision of the prophet Isaiah, God was to send a new “Servant of Yahweh” to remove the sins of the people. In the Bible it is always God himself who “carries” the sins of the people, thus making reconciliation possible. God suffers “for us” and “for many,” taking our place. God is himself the atoning God. How does this happen? God transforms human sin into his suffering by “carrying” human sin. According to the New Testament, Christ is not only the Brother of the victims but also the expiation for the culprits. “You, who carry the suffering of the world”—that is meant for the culprits. As long as this world exists, God not only bears the world’s history of suffering but also humankind’s history of guilt.

THE PRAXIS OF FOLLOWING THE CROSS

The concept of “praxis” should not be too narrowly defined, as if it dealt only with the active side of human endeavor. The passive experiences, which we call suffering, are also a part of the praxis of life. We will therefore ask first of all about the meaning of the “crucified God” for those who suffer in this age.

The Consolation of the Crucified God

Whoever suffers for no reason always thinks first of all that he or she has been abandoned by God and by all good spirits. When people cry out in their pain they can discover that they are joining in Christ’s loud cry at his death. They discover in the suffering Christ the *compassionate God* who understands. When someone discovers this, then he or she realizes that God is not the cold, distant force of destiny that some accuse him of being, but rather that, in Christ, he has become the human God who shouts with us and in us and speaks up for us when we are silenced by our anguish. The *God incarnate* has made our life a part of his life and has made our suffering his suffering. Therefore, in our pain we participate in his pain, and in our grief we participate in his grief.

It is told of Katharine of Siena that she once cried, “My God and Lord, where were You when my heart was in darkness and in mire?” And she heard this answer: “My daughter, you did not feel it—I was in your heart.”

The crucified Christ helps us. How does this happen? Those who suffer are not only protesting against their destiny. They feel pain because they love life, and they are alive because they say “yes” to life. Those who no longer love their own lives, nor those of others, become apathetic and no longer feel the pain. Life and death have become indifferent to them. They destroy their interest in life through alcohol or drugs. The more someone loves, the more vulnerable he or she becomes. Through the love of life he or she becomes capable of happiness, but also capable of suffering. The more joyful someone is capable of being, the more he or she is also capable of suffering and mourning. That is the dialectic of human life—love makes life lively and makes humans mortal. We perceive the liveliness of life and deadliness of death simultaneously and together in the life interest we call love.

How can this love of life be reborn out of suffering and sadness? That is the real life question. An almighty God who cannot suffer is poor, because he cannot love. Protest atheists love in a desperate way. They suffer because they love and protest against suffering and at the same time against the love that has led them to suffer. They want to return their ticket of admission into this world in which even children already suffer. Those who believe in the *compassionate God* recognize their suffering in God and God in their suffering and find in fellowship with him the strength to remain in love despite pain and sorrow, without becoming bitter. We do not know why God allows all of this. And even if we did know, it would not help us to live. When, however, we discover where God is and feel his presence in our suffering, then we have discovered the spring from which life can be born anew.

Following Christ

Whoever hears the gospel of the Crucified One also hears the call to follow him, and whoever decides to follow him must be willing to carry his cross. Already the Gospels say this. Christ is not just a Person, he is also a Way. Whoever believes in him follows in his Way. There can be no Christology without Christopraxis. We do not understand Christ only with our heads and hearts, but also through an entire way of life which is called discipleship. The Anabaptist, Hans Denk, expressed it at the time of the Reformation in the following way: "Nobody can truly know Christ unless he follows Him in his life." Discipleship is the holistic knowledge of Christ; it not only has ethical but also cognitive relevance for those who decide to follow him.

What does the "Way of Christ" consist in? According to the Gospels, it consists in the participation in Christ's messianic Passion: "As you go, preach this message: The kingdom of heaven is near. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give" (Matt. 10:7-8). These are the same messianic deeds in which John the Baptist was supposed to recognize that Jesus was the promised Christ (Matt. 11:5). To announce the Kingdom to the poor means to return to them the divine dignity that has been violently taken from them. To heal the sick means to plant the seeds of life in this world of death. To purify the unclean means to accept the handicapped who are displaced in our society. To drive out the Devil means to challenge the idols of the State and of society to whom so many of the weak have been sacrificed. Thus, whoever follows Christ's way, enters into the struggle of life against death. It won't be long until he or she begins to experience the violence of the powerful, who spread death because they live at the expense of other human beings. In my situation I see the "Way of Christ" in the struggle for peace based on justice, in the struggle against the exploitation and the indebtedness of the countries in the Third World, and in the struggle against the deadly destruction of nature.

The messianic passion of Christ always leads us to take the side of the victims. That is why the way of Christian discipleship is marked by a long line of martyrs

for the faith, for life, and for justice. There are *martyrs for the faith*. Those are Christians who are persecuted and killed because of their faith. There are *martyrs for obedience's sake*. Those are Christians who are persecuted and killed because of their public action. And there are *martyrs for the Kingdom of God and its justice*. Those are people who, knowingly or unknowingly, become witnesses for justice where injustice is being done. There is the martyrdom of Christians, of the just, and there is the silent, collective martyrdom of the sacrificed peoples.

Whenever the Christian community remembers the "sufferings of Christ" it also recalls the sufferings of the martyrs, who have participated in Christ's sufferings. In remembering the sufferings of Christ and the sufferings of the martyrs, we remind God himself of his promises and wait for the future of his Kingdom: "Remember, oh Lord, what is come upon us; consider, and behold our disgrace...Why do you forget us forever and forsake us for so long a time?" (Lam. 5:1, 20). Where forgetfulness rules, the dead are killed once again. In painful memories, hope is preserved. Remembering hastens salvation.

As I write this, I see before me the picture of brother Juan Ramón Moreno, one of the six murdered Jesuits from El Salvador. He is lying in a pool of his own blood in Jon Sobrino's room, and drenched in the blood lies my book, which has fallen to the floor, The Crucified God. This lecture is dedicated to his memory.