The nails in His hands were completely unnecessary, gratuitous, and stupidly cruel. Usually, the hands of the victims of crucifixion were tied to the crossbeam and that would have been enough. But His suffering was unusual—special.

It all begins the night before in a garden. He kneels and prays so mightily that He might be spared this suffering that His sweat pours like blood; He is now dehydrated and emotionally exhausted. Captured and taken to an interrogation by the religious powers that be, He is convicted, blindfolded, and beaten all night. Unable to protect Himself, His face is badly bruised and His eyes and mouth are injured. His body begins to descend into shock. In the morning, He is taken before a Roman tribunal which, under threat of a public riot, condemns Him to death by crucifixion, but not before He is flogged. He is stripped of His clothes and His hands are tied to a post above His head. The *flagelium*—a whip composed of short, heavy leather thongs to which small iron balls and sharp pieces of sheep’s bone are attached—rip repeatedly across his shoulders, back, buttocks, thighs, and legs. They first scratch superficial marks, but eventually open up capillaries and veins in the deeper tissues, leaving the flesh in torn, bleeding ribbons. Without time to rest, He is forced to stand, to receive a wooden staff and to be dressed in a purple robe as mockery of His royal claims, and to receive a twisted band of thorny twigs on His head. When they strike His head with the staff, the long thorns are driven deep into the sensitive scalp tissue, triggering even more bleeding. Finally, stripped of His purple robe—which re-opens His flogging-wounds—He is dressed again in His own robe and receives the *patibulum*: a 110-pound beam which will form the “T” of the cross. Dehydrated, exhausted, and now bleeding profusely, He cannot carry it. He falls three times on His face before a passer-by is compelled to carry the *patibulum* for Him. When they get to His destination He is offered an anesthetic—a mixture of wine and myrrh—He refuses to drink it. He is stripped naked before His mother, His best friend, and an angry, jeering mob. At this point His arms are tied to the *patibulum*. Usually, at this point, the victim is hoisted upward. Usually, death comes about because the weight of a suspended body puts pressure on the diaphragm such that in order to exhale and then inhale, one must pull his body upward with his arms tied above his head. Eventually, the arms fatigue and one suffocates. But this victim, for some reason, is special. In addition to tying His arms, the soldiers drive six-inch long, half an inch-thick iron spikes through His median nerve in the carpal tunnel of each hand, causing severe nerve damage. A single spike is driven through both feet, His legs bent at the knee, and the *patibulum* is raised and placed in a notch on the *stipes*—a tall post already planted in the ground. Now a terrible cycle of excruciating pain begins: He hangs by His arms until He is unable to breathe, and then He pushes down on His pierced feet and pulls up by His pierced hands to inhale briefly before slumping down again. And on, and on, until His legs cramp due to inadequate respiration and His exhaustion deepens. He suffers this way for six hours. And then, with a final cry, He dies.

It is unspeakable—incomprehensible. What are we to make of it?

In May of 1373, a 31 year-old woman, struck by a mortal illness, lay on her death bed. She was attended by her priest who gave her last rites and held up a crucifix to give her comfort as she prepared to die. The woman’s name was Julian, and for the previous ten years she had served as a semi-secluded nun in the English town of Norwich in southeastern England. Julian’s room was attached to the side of her parish church, with one window facing the altar so that she could attend worship services and receive Holy Communion, and with another window facing outside so that she could talk with the people of her community. As she lay on her deathbed, she must have wondered who would take care of her people after she had gone. Suddenly, her sight of her room began to fade and was replaced by a vision. The body on the crucifix in front of her came to life, and rivers of blood began to flow from the five wounds on it. Jesus began to speak to her and to show her a series of visions in which He reassured her of His total love and compassion for her, for her people, and for the world. Julian of Norwich would later recover and write down what she heard and saw in a book entitled *The Revelations of Divine Love*. In the Ninth Revelation, Julian of Norwich describes the following exchange:

Then said our good Lord Jesus Christ: ‘Are you well pleased that I suffered for you?’ I said: ‘Yea, good Lord, I thank You; Yea, good Lord, blessed may You be.’ Then said Jesus, our kind Lord: ‘If you are pleased, I am pleased: it is a joy, a bliss, an endless satisfying to me that ever suffered I Passion for you; and if I might suffer more, I would suffer more.’

When we look at the Cross and see the suffering of Christ, we may think that we see a special kind of horror, pain, and death. Certainly, those things are present. But when God looks at the Cross, He sees only the special lengths to which He would go to reclaim us. He sees only the special price He delighted to pay to redeem us. He sees only His special gift of all that He is and all that He has to remake us, and to bring us back to Himself. We look at the Cross and see suffering. God looks at the Cross and sees love. And that is why it is called His Passion.