

# The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

## Chapter 1: Jesus in Gethsemane

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Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane, and saith unto the disciples, "Sit ye here while I go and pray yonder." And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee and began to be sorrowful and very heavy. Then saith he unto them, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: Tarry ye here, and watch with me." And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, "What, could ye not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, "O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done." And he came and found them asleep again: for their eyes were heavy. And he left them, and went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. Then cometh he to his disciples, and saith unto them, "Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners." (Matthew 26:36-45)

### Introduction

The agony of Christ in Gethsemane "is a passage of Scripture which we should always approach with peculiar reverence. The history which it records is one of the 'deep things of God.' While we read it, the words of Exodus should come across our minds, 'Put off thy shoes from off thy feet; the place whereon thou standest is holy ground' (Exod. iii. 5)."<sup>1</sup> "Here we come to the Holy of Holies of our Lord's life on earth. This is a mystery like that which Moses saw when the bush burned with fire, and was not consumed."<sup>2</sup> Although our Lord's whole earthly life was one of suffering and humiliation, it is at Gethsemane that Christ's suffering is intensified beyond human comprehension. It is as though the sword of Jehovah's wrath against the sin of the world was awakened at that time. "The clouds had been gathering a good while, and looked back.... But now the storm began in earnest."<sup>3</sup> "Hitherto, we have seen the preparative for Christ's sufferings; now we enter upon the bloody scene."<sup>4</sup> During His life the Savior had walked the path of rejection, hardship and sorrow; but, at this pivotal point in history He begins a steep descent toward the horrifying curse of God for the sins of the elect (Gal. 3:13; 2 Cor. 5:21).

It is for this reason that the passion of Jesus begins with His intense agony at Gethsemane.<sup>5</sup> The last hours of the Savior's life from late Thursday night (14<sup>th</sup> Nisan or the 6<sup>th</sup> of

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<sup>1</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Luke* (Carlisle of, PA: Banner of Truth [1858] 1986), 2:420.

<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1987), 384.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, n. d.) 5:394.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> The term "passion" comes from the Greek word *pascho* which means to suffer anguish, to suffer death. The most profound and important occurrence of this word in the N.T. is found in Acts 1:3 which reads: "To whom also he

April) to Friday afternoon contain the events that form the central core of the gospel message. In the passion narratives our Lord's formal teaching ministry is over; "apart from a few key sayings, Jesus is silent. The time for teaching, and therefore the time for response to Jesus' appeal, is past. There remains only the work he came to do."<sup>6</sup>

## The Place of Agony

The gospels of Mark and Matthew identify this special place of inner conflict at Gethsemane (Mt. 26:36; Mk. 14:32). Luke uses a general term "the place" (Lk. 22:40). All three synoptic gospels imply that Gethsemane was on "the Mount of Olives" (Mk 14:26; Mt. 26:30; Lk. 22:39). The apostle John identifies it as a "garden" across the brook Kidron (Jn 18:1). According to the ancient historian Josephus, "the suburbs of Jerusalem abounded with charming gardens and 'paradises' (War vi. 1:1)."<sup>7</sup>

The word Gethsemane is a Greek translation of the Hebrew and Aramaic words *gat semane* which mean "oil-press." It is very likely that Gethsemane was an olive orchard and not simply a private garden. This orchard was probably on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives. To get to this secluded place the disciples would have walked with Jesus east of Jerusalem across the Kidron Valley and the brook Kidron. The Hebrew word Kidron "means 'dark waters'—emblematic of that black stream through which He was about to pass. The Kidron was on the east side of the city, dividing Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives (Josephus). It was on the west side of the city that He was crucified: thus did the Son of Righteousness complete His atoning circuit!"<sup>8</sup>

John's description of Jesus entering a garden (*kapos*) implies that it was a walled garden. Stones are abundant on the Mount of Olives and were often organized by farmers into crude fences. The word translated "place" (*chorion*) can be translated "plot of land" (cf. Jn. 4:5; Ac. 1:18; 4:34; 5:3; 28:7). The same word is sometimes rendered piece of land, field, land, lands or possessions. It is likely that Gethsemane was a working farm. Our Lord may have known the owner. It is thus possible that this orchard still contained a working olive press.

The time that Jesus arrived at Gethsemane is not specifically stated in any of the accounts. Therefore, commentators offer a wide range of possible times. A few say eight or nine (e.g., Fairbairn), others nine or ten (e.g., Morison) and still others as late as eleven to twelve o' clock. "Lichenstein (411) puts it at midnight: first, because usually of this hour the supper was ended; second, because if He had left earlier, there would have been too great [a] delay at Gethsemane."<sup>9</sup> The fact that the disciples could not stay awake (Mk. 14:40; Mt. 26:43) indicates that these events probably took place very late in the evening.

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shewed himself alive after his passion" [GK. *pathein*]. "The fact that the Passion is mentioned in the opening of the Acts shows that it was the central core of the message taught throughout the apostolic period" (W. White Jr., "Passion" in Merrill C. Tenney, general editor, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975, 76], 4: 605).

<sup>6</sup> R.T. France, *Matthew* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 359.

<sup>7</sup> James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, [1884] 1981), 541.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan [1948] 1968), 3:156. It was this same brook Kidron that David and his closest followers crossed after being betrayed by Ahithophel (see 2 Sam. 15:23ff.). David the king, a vivid type of Christ, crossed this same brook in tears.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel J. Andrews, *Life of Our Lord upon the Earth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), 497-498.

There are a number of things that merit our attention regarding the place of Christ's agony.

(1) Gethsemane was a familiar place to Jesus and the apostles. Luke 22:39 reads, "Coming out, He went to the Mount of Olives, as He was accustomed, and His disciples also followed Him." "There was one particular place on the mount of Olives, to which our Lord was in the habit of going, which was well-known to all the disciples, and to Judas Iscariot among the rest."<sup>10</sup> This explains how Judas the traitor knew where to find the Savior and led the armed band of enemies to the very spot where he was praying. "To take any one prisoner by night of course requires an intimate knowledge of his habits, and of the place where he is. If Judas therefore had not guided the party which took Jesus, they might have spent the night in searching for Him in vain."<sup>11</sup>

This fact tells us two important things. First, the betrayal by Judas (an apostle, an insider) was crucial for the arrest of Christ. Second, it emphasizes the fact that our Lord willingly laid His life down for His people. "Jesus goes obediently to a fate which 'must' happen in fulfillment of the Scriptures. The Son of God is willingly carrying out his Father's purpose. There is no sense of his being the unfortunate victim of forces too strong for him; he is in charge."<sup>12</sup>

Christ knew that Judas was going to betray Him (Jn. 13:27), yet he went willingly and bravely to the place of His arrest. John's account says, "And Judas, who betrayed Him, also knew the place; for Jesus often met there with His disciples" (Jn. 18:2). Thomas Goodwin writes, "Our Lord and Savior knew that He should be taken by Judas, and that this was the place appointed by His Father wherein He should be taken; for the 4<sup>th</sup> verse tells us 'Jesus therefore, knowing all things that should come upon him,' etc. He knew that Judas would be there that night, and, therefore, like a valiant champion, He cometh into the field first, afore His enemy. He goeth thither to choose, and singles out this place on purpose."<sup>13</sup>

We should not be surprised that our Lord went to an old familiar place to suffer and pray. He liked certain isolated areas where He could draw near to God. It was a place of many former meditations and interchanges with God. It would be wise and expedient for us to find certain peaceful places where we can delight to commune with Jehovah.

(2) Christ's choice of the Mount of Olives for the beginning of His passion had sober meanings for the nation of Israel. When Jehovah placed the covenant nation under judgment and captivity, His divine glory (the visible symbol of His special presence) departed from the temple in Jerusalem and stood over the Mount of Olives, which is directly east of Jerusalem. Ezekiel writes, "So the cherubim lifted up their wings, with wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel was high above them. And the glory of the Lord went up from amidst the city and stood on the mountain which is on the east side of the city" (11:22-23). God's only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, the greater Temple, was now leaving the covenant nation at the insistence of the nation itself. The agony and passion of the Savior brought salvation to those who believed but also judgment and death to His enemies.

Not only did the Mount of Olives remind the Jews of God's departure from the nation, but it was also the place where Jehovah would appear to crush the heathen nations and deliver His people. Zechariah writes, "And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives which faces Jerusalem on the east. And the Mount of Olives shall be split in two, from east to west,

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<sup>10</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Luke*, 2:424.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> R.T. France, *Matthew*, 359.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Goodwin as quoted in Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:158.

making a very large valley; half of the Mountain shall move toward the north and half of it toward the south” (Zech. 14:4).

The mountain where Jesus begins His passion is the same place where He ascends to heaven (Ac. 1:12) and returns in victory. The cleft in the mountain that represents our deliverance from Satan, sin and death was secured by the agony, suffering and sacrifice of Christ. The valley of deliverance for both Jew and Gentile was cut by the sinless blood of the Son of God.

(3) The place of agony is appropriate to our Lord’s redemptive work in that the olive was a symbol of peace. Even in modern times the phrase “to offer the olive branch” means to offer peace. “Under that great solemn Passover moon there bent down One in infinite agony who is our Olive, our Peace. Let us repeat these words to the soul, till they become tender by gracious familiarity. ‘He is our Peace: he hath made both one’ [Eph. 2:14].”<sup>14</sup>

Further, there is no tree which in its appearance is more suggestive of suffering than the olive tree. “It twists and winds and turns about as though it were in agony. It has to draw up oil out of the flinty rock, and it seems to do so with great labour and travail.”<sup>15</sup> This olive orchard, on that moonlit night, was no doubt beautiful and peaceful. But like our Lord, who was experiencing agony in His soul, the trees even appeared to be twisting and groaning in pain.

(4) The garden of Gethsemane was appropriate for a soul struggle because it was a place of meditation. The greatest conflict that Jesus had to endure and the most intense sufferings inflicted upon Him all took place in His soul. While we do not in the least want to downplay the pain endured by His physical body, the mental anguish of experiencing God’s unmitigated wrath clearly troubled Him the most. In this quiet place of meditation, the horror His soul endured is nothing less than a death-struggle. When He entered this fierce struggle, He prostrated Himself in prayer to His Father.

(5) There is a sad ending for this lovely orchard in that the very trees that witnessed the agony of the Savior were cut down by the Romans and used in their siege works of the city. “Josephus informs us that the Romans, at their siege ‘cut down all the trees that were in the immediate neighborhood of the city, and for ninety furlongs round about’ (War vi. 1:1).”<sup>16</sup> The very trees whose ground soaked up the bloody sweat and tears of the Son of God became siege equipment for the destruction of Christ’s enemies, the persecutors of His people. If we do not trust in the sufferings of Jesus and lay hold of His perfect redemption our end will be destruction.

In modern-day Israel, on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives, there is a small-enclosed area of eight very ancient olive trees. These trees are often shown to tourists and it is claimed that they are some of the original trees of Gethsemane. Such a claim, however, is extremely unlikely, if not impossible, given Josephus’ account of the destruction of the city. The present trees probably date to the middle ages.

(6) A number of church fathers and even some modern commentators see a contrast between Gethsemane and the Garden of Eden. More specifically, they see a contrast between the failure of the first Adam in paradise and the triumph of the second Adam in the garden of Gethsemane. In his commentary on the gospel of John, Arthur W. Pink beautifully notes this contrast:

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph Parker, *Christ’s Finished Work* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG, [1889] 1998), 174.

<sup>15</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “Jesus in Gethsemane” in *The Life and Work of Our Lord* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 3:91.

<sup>16</sup> James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, 542.

The entrance of Christ into the Garden at once reminds us of Eden. The contrasts between them are indeed most striking. In Eden, all was delightful; in Gethsemane, all was terrible. In Eden, Adam and Eve parleyed with Satan; in Gethsemane, the last Adam sought the face of His Father. In Eden, Adam sinned; in Gethsemane, the Savior suffered. In Eden, Adam fell; in Gethsemane, the Redeemer conquered. The conflict in Eden took place by day; the conflict in Gethsemane was waged at night. In the one, Adam fell before Satan; in the other, the soldiers fell before Christ. In Eden the race was lost; in Gethsemane Christ announced, "Of them whom thou givest me have I lost none" (John 18:9). In Eden, Adam took the fruit from Eve's hand; in Gethsemane, Christ received the cup from His Father's hand. In Eden, Adam hid himself; in Gethsemane, Christ boldly showed Himself. In Eden, God sought Adam; in Gethsemane, the last Adam sought God! From Eden Adam was "driven;" from Gethsemane Christ was "led." In Eden the "sword" was drawn (Gen. 3:24); in Gethsemane the "sword" was sheathed (John 18:11).<sup>17</sup>

## The Nature of Christ's Suffering

Having arrived at the place of prayer, Jesus enters a conflict in His soul that is nothing less than supreme agony. The soul of our Lord sustained a whole range of intense, excruciating, and negative emotions. It is as though the Savior came to find sweet communion with God and, instead, found Himself dropping into the abyss, into an emotional cauldron of unimaginable suffering. It is a scene that is painful to behold; for we see the rock of our salvation, the beautiful and noble Prince laid prostrate under the burden of our own iniquities. "He was now *bearing the iniquities* which the Father laid upon him, and by his sorrow and amazement, he accommodated himself to his undertaking. The sufferings he was entering were for our sins; they were all made to meet upon him, and he knew it. As we are obliged to be sorry for our particular sins, so was he grieved for the sins of us all."<sup>18</sup>

There are a number of things that need to be noted regarding our Savior's suffering.

(1) The agony that Jesus endured was multifaceted. The blows that encompassed His soul came from every corner. His suffering was not simple, but complex. We can only begin to understand this suffering by noting that He had to suffer the penalty that sin deserved for millions and millions of people. "Hence it is part of His calling to quail in anguish before our God.... One would need to have been in hell for some time in order to understand what it is that is tearing Jesus apart in the garden."<sup>19</sup> Let us now focus our eye of faith upon what the Savior did for us. Let us examine the various terms used in the gospels to describe this suffering.

a) The first emotion we encounter is found only in Mark's gospel. In Mark 14:33 we are told that Jesus was "greatly amazed" (Matthew 26:37 says "sorrowful"). The word *ekthambeisthai* (*ekthambeo*), translated as "sore amazed" (KJV), "deeply distressed" (NKJV, NIV), "very distressed" (NASB), "greatly amazed" (RSV), "thoroughly alarmed" (Wuest), or "appalled" (Lane), is a strong term that means "to be amazed or terrified." It can, in certain contexts, be translated "to be deeply distressed." Mark uses the word here in its strongest sense of shock and awe mixed with terror and dread. "The Lord was overwhelmed with sorrow, but His first feeling was one of terrified surprise."<sup>20</sup> "Jesus came to be with the Father for an

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<sup>17</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:157-158.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:395.

<sup>19</sup> Klaas Schilder, *Christ in His Suffering* (St. Catherine, Ontario: Paideia [1938] 1979), 296.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Mark* (Grand Rapids: Kregel [1913] 1977), 342.

interlude before his betrayal, but found hell rather than heaven opened before him, and he staggered.”<sup>21</sup> Matthew Henry writes, “[*Ekthambeisthai*] bespeaks something like that *horror of great darkness*, which *fell upon Abraham* (Gen. xv. 12), or, rather, something much worse, and more frightful. The terrors of God set themselves in array against him, and he allowed himself the actual and intense contemplation of them.”<sup>22</sup>

Our Lord knew from the beginning that His path was always directed toward Golgotha, that He would become accursed for our sakes. Yet, it seems that at this time, in the garden, the outer darkness of alienation from God and the terrors and sorrows that such alienation brings pressed upon Him in a new, vivid, and terrifying manner. His soul was being scourged with waves of dark fear and immense sorrow. No human who ever lived experienced terror like our Savior. No one ever felt the sorrow and heart agony that our Lord felt. “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

b) Another emotion that Jesus encountered in the garden was deep sorrow mixed with grief. Matthew says that “He began to be sorrowful” (*lupeisthai*) (26:37). Then, in the next verse, he intensifies the same word by adding *peri*. The word translated as sorrowful (KJV, NKJV, RSV) or grieved (NASB) means to be sad, grieved or distressed with sorrow. When the prefix *peri* is added (*perilupos*), it means to be “deeply sorrowful,” “afflicted beyond measure” or “very sad.”<sup>23</sup> The same word is used of the rich young ruler when he realized he could not follow Christ (Mk. 10:22; Mt. 19:22: *lupoumenos*) and of King Herod after the daughter of Herodias asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter (Mt. 14:9).

The very depth of Christ’s sorrow is revealed by both Matthew and Mark who say, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto death” (Mt. 26:38; Mk. 14:34). The expression “sorrowful unto death” means sorrowful to the utmost degree. “Jesus tells Peter, James and John that his sorrow is so great that he is hardly able to bear it. The forgiveness of sins that he offers (cf. v. 28) will be accomplished only at an incomprehensible cost that goes far beyond physical death.”<sup>24</sup> “[H]is soul was full of sorrow, until he seemed to reach the utmost limit of endurance, and to be at the very gate of death.”<sup>25</sup> “He was made sin for us, and was thus sorrowful; he fully knew *malignity of the sins* he was to *suffer for*; and having the highest degree of love to God, who was *offended* by them”<sup>26</sup> was exceedingly sorrowful unto death. Ambrose says of this passage: “[T]here is no instance in which I admire more his kindness and his majesty; for he would not have done so much for me, if he had not taken upon him my feelings. He grieved for me, who had no cause of grief for himself; and, laying aside the delights of the eternal Godhead, he experiences the affliction of my weakness. I boldly call it sorrow, because I preach the cross. For, he took upon him not the appearance, but the reality, of incarnation. It was therefore necessary that he should experience grief, that he might overcome sorrow, and not shut it out; for the praise of fortitude is not bestowed on those who are rather stupefied than pained by wounds.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:552.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> See R. Bultman, *T.D.N.T.*, IV: 323.

<sup>24</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* (Nashville: Nelson, 1995), 782-783.

<sup>25</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 385.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:552.

<sup>27</sup> Ambrose as quoted in John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 3:226-227.

In Jesus' description of his soul suffering we find a number of allusions to Old Testament language. For example, in Psalm 42, the psalmist repeatedly asks: "Why are you cast down, O my soul?" (vs. 5, 6, 11; cf. Ps. 43:5). When David contemplates an experience of deliverance by God, he writes, "I cried unto the LORD with my voice; with my voice unto the LORD did I make my supplication. I poured out my complaint before Him; I shewed before Him my trouble. When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, then thou knewest my path" (Ps. 142: 1-3). The phrase "to the point of death" is an echo of Jonah who said, "It is right for me to be angry, even to death" (4:9b). The suffering of David and other psalmists pales in comparison to what our Lord endured. This is because His work was vicarious: "Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Isa. 53:4).

c) Matthew and Mark also tell us that Christ's soul was "very heavy" (KJV) or "deeply distressed" (NKJV) (Mk. 14:33; Mt. 26:37). The verb *ademoneo*, translated as "distressed" (NASB), "sore troubled" (RSV), "be troubled" (NIV), "greatly distressed" (Morison), "worried" (Lenski), "grievously troubled" (Lane), carries the notion of intense emotional pain related to a strong concern, anxiety, uneasiness or anguish. This verb in classic Greek was "employed by Xenophon and Plato to denote extreme anxiety and anguish."<sup>28</sup> In Greek literature of the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D., it is used to describe someone who is "excessively concerned."<sup>29</sup> Lenski argues that in this context it means "to be filled with uneasiness and dread."<sup>30</sup> The same verb is used in only one other place in the New Testament where Paul tells the Philippians that Epaphroditus "was distressed" or "greatly troubled" because the Philippian church had heard that he was sick (Phil. 2:26).

That our Lord was "greatly troubled" in His soul in this context is understandable, for while He had suffered and been troubled before, "now they became intensified into the superlative degree, so that He could not refrain from strong crying and tears."<sup>31</sup> Jesus "bowed down as if an enormous weight rested on his soul as indeed it did."<sup>32</sup> He knew that the sin of the whole world would soon crush Him in the wine press of His Father's holy wrath. He was seized with trembling, anguish, sorrow and extreme concern, for He was about to be an atonement for sin. His fellowship with the Father was eclipsed when He took upon Himself the curse of God's holy law.

d) Another word used to describe the suffering of Jesus is found in Luke's account of Gethsemane. Luke tells us that the Savior was in agony. "And being in agony, he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (22:44). The Greek word (*agonia*), translated "agony" (KJV, NKJV, RSV, ASV, NASB) or "anguish" (NIV), originally referred to "anxiety" or "inner tension," "most strictly it indicates the 'supreme concentration of powers' in face of imminent decisions or disasters."<sup>33</sup> Ancient "medics used *agonia* only with reference to severe mental distress."<sup>34</sup>

In Luke's account God sends an angel to strengthen our Lord almost at the very moment that Christ's inner struggle is reaching its highest peak. "There is in the aorist participle a suggestion of a *growing intensity* in the struggle, which is not conveyed by the simple *being*."

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<sup>28</sup> J.A. Alexander, *Mark* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1858] 1960), 386.

<sup>29</sup> A.T. Robertson, 212.

<sup>30</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *Interpretation of Matthew*, 1038.

<sup>31</sup> James Morrison, 543.

<sup>32</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 385.

<sup>33</sup> Stauffer, "agonia" in Gerharn Kittel ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:140.

<sup>34</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, [1946] 1961), 1079.

Literally, though very awkwardly, it is, *having become in an agony*.<sup>35</sup> “The mind and the body that were sinking lower and lower beneath the strain rallied powerfully to face the full horror of the curse and the wrath that were impending. That is why Jesus went on to pray more intensively in this supreme moment.”<sup>36</sup> Of all the conflicts, battles and tumults in the whole history of the world, nothing has compared to this conflict. This was the decisive battle on which the fate of the whole world depended. Our Lord stared sin, the curse, death, hell and separation with His precious Father in the face and experienced a fierce conflict in His soul. Although as a perfect sinless man He experienced a hurricane of painful emotions and was dealt a blow near unto death, His resolve to obey His Father’s will never wavered.

We must never forget that the path of total victory over sin, hell, the devil and this evil world is stained with the tears, sweat and blood of our precious Savior. “The Head must be thrust under the breakers of wrath in order that the members may remain standing in freedom and joy. Jesus, the Mediator who is the Guarantor of a better covenant, is punished and afflicted for the sake of others. He must suffer all sorrows for them, must writhe because of awful anguish in order that the members of His body may without any dread at all see God’s judgment seat standing behind the arena, the guillotine, [the concentration camp] or the death bed.”<sup>37</sup> He wipes away every tear from our eyes because He filled that quiet moonlit night with his crying; He watered the cold earth with His tears and stained it with His sinless blood.

In order for us to understand the extreme nature of Jesus’ suffering, Luke the physician tells us: “Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (22:44). It has been thought by some that the passage only means that the sweat was like, or similar to, drops of blood. The term “like” in Scripture, however, can signify not only resemblance, but also the identical thing itself. The Savior’s suffering was so intense that he suffered what physicians call *hematidrosis*. “It must be born in mind that the human nature of Jesus was sinless, and therefore very sensitive. When these factors—extreme anguish, earnest supplication, unparalleled sensitivity—are combined, the resulting strain can easily cause subcutaneous capillaries to dilate to such an extent that they will burst. And when this happens, as it was almost bound to do, in the vicinity of sweat glands, blood and sweat will be exuded together. This can happen over a large part of the body.”<sup>38</sup> “With the perspirings on his face, and huge drops on his brow man toils for the bread that perishes; but bread is only the staff of life: when Christ toiled for life itself to give it to men he sweat, not the common perspiration of the outward form, but the blood which flows from the very heart itself.”<sup>39</sup>

Beloved, we must meditate on these awful sufferings of the Savior. Behold the bloody sweat of the sinless Son of God, “which the violence of Christ’s grief and sorrow for our sins forced out of His veins!”<sup>40</sup> With the eye of faith, study and lay hold of this bloody, suffering Man who left behind the shining courts of His eternal glory to suffer supreme humiliation. Look at this poor, feeble and despised man as He conquers sin and death. Survey this dark and dreadful scene where the spotless Lamb suffered not for Himself but for the iniquities of us all. From the depths of His heart to the sweat on His skin He suffered for us. “Oh the love of Jesus! Oh the weight of sin! Oh the debt of gratitude which you and I owe to him!”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, [1887]1946), 1:425.

<sup>36</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel*, 1079.

<sup>37</sup> Klaas Schilder, *Christ in His Suffering*, 294-295.

<sup>38</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 983.

<sup>39</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Garden of the Soul” in *The Life and Work of Our Lord*, 3:85.

<sup>40</sup> Alfred Nevin, *Popular Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke* (Philadelphia, PA: William Flint, 1868).

<sup>41</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Life and Work of Our Lord*, 3:85.

## The Reasons for Christ's Suffering

As we look at this scene of immense suffering by Jesus, the crucial question that immediately comes to mind is why? Why did our Lord experience such terror, dread, sorrow and anguish in the garden?

(1) One obvious reason is that He suffered in anticipation of what lay before Him. Although we can never know what was in our Savior's mind at this time, we can surmise from His reactions at Gethsemane that He at the least became vividly aware of the sufferings immediately before Him. Although the gospel accounts make it very clear that Jesus knew: He would be delivered into the hands of men (Mk. 9:31) and to the Gentiles (Mk. 10:33); He must suffer and be rejected (Mk. 8:31); He would be mocked, scourged, and spat upon (Mk. 10:34); He must be condemned to death (Mk. 10:33) and killed (Mk. 8:31); His own disciples would forsake Him (Mk. 14:27; Mt. 26:31); Judas would betray Him (Mk. 14:21; Mt. 26:24); and His own nation would reject Him long before Gethsemane (Jn. 1:11), the reality of the full horror of the curse and the wrath of God was encompassing Him in a new, more powerful manner. "He had a foretaste of what it meant to be 'forsaken' by his heavenly Father. And it is not unreasonable to assume that during these dreadful periods of anguish Satan and His demons assaulted him, with the intention of causing Him to turn aside from the path of obedience to God?"<sup>42</sup>

This point can be deduced from Christ's prayers to have the cup<sup>43</sup> removed. The metaphor of the cup indicates that Jesus saw himself confronted with the chalice of God's judgment and wrath against sin. Mark adds the statement, "He...prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him" (14:35). Then a little later when His arrest is imminent our Lord says, "The hour has come; behold, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners" (14:41). The term "hour" refers to the period of time set by God for the atoning sacrifice of the Son, "the hour in which God would remove all hindrances and let the hatred of the foes of Jesus have its full sway. This hour was now fully come—a few moments, and it would be here."<sup>44</sup> Since Jesus repeatedly prayed to the Father to spare Him from the coming wrath that was about to consume Him and would climax in the ultimate suffering exhibited by our Lord's death cry "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me" (Mk. 15:34; Mt. 27:46), His fear, anxiety, dread, surprise and anguish had a future-oriented aspect to it.

At Gethsemane we see Christ in His weakness. This is one of the clearest portions of Scripture to portray the Savior in His true humanity. The Word who became flesh (Jn. 1:14) had all the weakness and infirmities of true manhood, yet without sin. The term "flesh," as it applies to Jesus in His frailties, weaknesses and infirmities, indicates that even though the Savior was

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<sup>42</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, 982.

<sup>43</sup> The symbolism of the cup full of God's wrath is common in Scripture. "For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup, and the wine is red; it is fully mixed, and He pours it out; surely its dregs shall all the wicked of the earth drain and drink down" (Ps. 75:80). "Awake, awake! Stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of His fury; you have drunk the dregs of the cup of trembling and drained it out!" (Isa. 51:17; cf. 51:22). "For thus says the Lord God of Israel to me: 'Take this wine cup of fury from My hand, and cause all the nations, to whom I send you, to drink it. And they will drink and stagger and go mad because of the sword that I will send among them'" (Jer. 25:15-16; cf. Lam. 4:21; Ezek. 23:33-35). "The cup of the Lord's right hand will be turned against you, and utter shame will be on your glory" (Hab. 2:16). The book of Revelation speaks of "the cup of His indignation" (14:10); "the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath" (16:19).

<sup>44</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Mark's Gospel*, 636.

sinless and holy, His human nature was not yet glorified. He was ethically perfect, yet He had to suffer the weaknesses of human nature after the fall—hunger, thirst, weariness, toil, sorrow, grief, shock, fear, pain, wounding and even death itself. “From his cradle to the grave he bare all the infirmities of our nature, with all the dolorous and grievous effects of them. Hence all his days he was...a ‘man of sorrows’, filled with them, never free from them; familiarly ‘acquainted with grief,’ as a companion that never departed from him.”<sup>45</sup> But it was toward the end of His days, “in his last suffering, when all his sorrows, trials, and temptations came to a head”<sup>46</sup> to the point of tears, bloody sweat and, finally, death itself.

The reality and exhibition of Christ’s human passions refutes some common misconceptions in our day. One such misconception equates a strong faith with stoicism or a total lack of emotion altogether. According to this view the Christian ideal is something more akin to *Star Trek*’s Spock than the Savior who agonized and shed tears. This view perhaps arose because human passion so often exceeds its due bounds and proper restraint.<sup>47</sup> We must remember that Jesus exhibited strong emotions (even anger) yet with total purity, without any stain of sin. People who attempt to find something unseemly in our Lord’s behavior at Gethsemane have much more in common with Greek paganism than Scripture.

Another misconception looks at passion, emotions and suffering as an end in itself. This is the view of various ascetics and Romanists who seek suffering and pain as ends in themselves: hair shirts, chains, excessive fasting and so on. We must remember that Jesus’ suffering served a distinct purpose. He did not seek suffering for suffering’s sake, but to pay the penalty of the sins of His people. While it is true that Christians are called to suffer for Christ’s sake, they are not to go out of their way to seek it. Believers should avoid persecution and unjust suffering whenever lawfully possible.

(2) Although we must not lose sight of the fact that our Lord suffered in anticipation of God’s cup of wrath against sin, we also must not forget that the suffering in the garden itself was *vicarious*. That is, Jesus endured this sorrow, pain, fear, dread and terror in our place, on our behalf. This point is proven by the fact that, as a lamb without spot or blemish, the Savior did not and could not have justly suffered for Himself. As the second Adam, God’s Son battled and conquered evil to save us from our own miserable failure to obey God and ultimately delivered us from all fear and suffering. “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day” (Lk. 9:22).

Christ took upon Himself the fear, dread, shock and sorrow of the curse in order to deliver us from it. Our Lord had no horror of simply passing out of this world; rather, it was God’s wrath and vengeance against our sin that was soon to be placed upon Him to the uttermost that caused Him such torment and anguish of mind. “Our Lord’s suffering in the garden was caused by the burden of a world’s imputed sin, which then began to press upon Him in a peculiar manner. He had undertaken to be ‘sin for us,’—to be ‘made a curse for us,’—and to allow our iniquities to be laid on Himself. (2 Cor. v. 21. Gal. lii 13. Isai. liii. 6.)... We must cling firmly to

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<sup>45</sup> John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1855]1980), 4:498.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:499.

<sup>47</sup> Regarding the emotions of Christ, Matthew Henry writes, “[T]here was not the least disorder or irregularity in this commotion of his spirits; his affections rose not tumultuously, but under direction, and as they were called up, for he had no corrupt nature to mix with them, as we have. If water have a sediment at the bottom, though it may be clear while it stands still, yet, when shaken, it grows muddy; so it is with our affections: but pure water in a clean glass, though ever so much stirred, continues clear; and so it was with Christ” (5:552).

the old doctrine that Christ was ‘bearing our sins,’ both in the garden and on the cross. No other doctrine can ever explain the passage before us, or satisfy the conscience of guilty man.”<sup>48</sup>

But one may ask: How can Jesus be suffering for sin and suffering in anticipation of the horrors of Golgotha at the same time? The answer is that the Savior’s work of redemption is an organic whole, a seamless garment. Further, the gospel accounts record a progress in His suffering. The Heidelberg catechism says that “all the time he lived on earth, but especially at the end of his life, he bore, in body and soul, the wrath of God against sin...” (Answer to Question 37). Our Lord’s experience of suffering can be compared to a plant that from the beginning experiences growth, yet does not begin to flower until Gethsemane and the night of His betrayal. The Savior is totally aware that after the holy supper He will enter a new phase of His suffering. Thus, He said to the apostles, “With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer” (Lk. 22:15). The suffering will continue and increase as the Lord moves closer to Golgotha. After Gethsemane, He is disowned and rejected by His own people. He is betrayed, arrested, bound, tried, condemned, tortured, crucified, slain and buried. “At the beginning of this dark way he speaks of not yet being alone, but that the Father is with him (John 16:32); but on the cross the Father’s name departs from his lips (Mt. 27:46).”<sup>49</sup>

The only way to understand the suffering at Gethsemane is to view it as vicarious. Then, and only then, can we begin to fathom our Lord’s sudden fall into deep sorrow, perplexity, dread and anguish. It was at this time that God *began* forsaking Him. We must understand that the heart of the Savior’s suffering was not the hatred of His people, the blows, the insults, the mocking and the physical pain of scourging. The thing that caused the most suffering in Christ was the fact that His father was now leaving Him. Schilder writes,

This is God’s hour to forsake. Up to this time Jesus had to work. He had to administer the Passover, to give the Supper; He had to deliver prophetic discourses, to perturb Judas, to impel Satan, to wash the feet—he had to give, always to give. As Mediator He had to perform His daily work calmly. But the clock is striking now.

Now the Father thrusts Him into the abyss of perfect long-suffering, thrusts Him back from the luxury of the Mediator’s *deed*, which *gives*, into the pain of the Mediator’s forsakenness, which can only cry for help.

Now wrath flares up against Him, for He must know what it means to represent a host of condemned and yet be forsaken of all. God withholds the comfortings of the Spirit, the helpful whisperings of love, the assurances of faith. These He withholds in order that it may become manifest that the Lamb, in spite of His being forsaken, still peers into the darkness, looking for God. To have no voice other than the one voice of the eyes, and with that voice to ask, tremblingly: Where is my God? To be a prophet and to groan with the genuine groanings of all created beings—that is Christ in His awful solitude.<sup>50</sup>

The key to understanding Gethsemane is to view it theocentrically. Jesus who was both God and man in one person; who was without original or actual sin, had a perfect, sweet communion with the Father at all times; in every moment of every day. There is a sense in which, in this olive orchard, Christ is struggling to bid His precious Father a farewell as He enters the depths of hell. If we can understand even a little: the relationship that our Lord had with God; what it meant to Him; how He treasured it; how it was the axis of his whole life, then

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<sup>48</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 2:422-423.

<sup>49</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 145.

<sup>50</sup> Klaas Schilder, *Christ in His Suffering*, 307.

this sudden descent into this emotional abyss makes sense. Yes, it is true that God sent the angel to comfort His Son. But, He did so as He was turning away from Jesus. The Father sent that angel because He did not want His Son to die of a broken heart before He shed His blood on the cross. It was necessary that the Savior endure: a judicial process leading to condemnation as a common criminal even though He was innocent; a public execution where the innocent would die for the guilty; and, a death that involved the spilling of His blood by violence.

In Gethsemane our Lord's suffering was vicarious and redemptive, but He was not yet experiencing the full brunt of God's holy wrath. There would be no comforting angels while Christ hung on the cross. There would be no disciples to keep watch. The full eclipse of God's love and favor toward the Son would occur while He hung on the tree and all His sinless blood dripped from His body. Look to Christ; have faith in His vicarious suffering. Yes, it is true that all our works are as filthy rags before God and that, apart from the Savior, we deserve the agony of an eternal hell. But, Jesus suffered in our place so that we could behold the face of God and fully experience His love.

Having noted the vicarious nature of our Lord's suffering, it is important that we reject any theology or philosophy that argues that Jesus only suffered as an example, that His sufferings were only intended to teach the human race how to love one another. Such heretical teaching may be popular, but it is an explicit denial of the gospel. It presents the Savior as nothing more than a noble martyr and His suffering as something infinitely less than it really was. Our Lord was the surety for the elect, bore the curse of the law and forever removed the sting of death for us. "Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power" (Rev. 20:6).

(3) The suffering of Christ was also necessary for the discharge of His high priestly office. This point is brought out with clarity in Hebrews 5:7-8: "In the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of his godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered." Although Jesus Christ was fully God, He also was truly a man. He was made like us in every way with the single exception of any original or actual sin (Heb. 4:15). As a true man He learned obedience. Obviously, as one without any blemish of sin, He did not have to learn obedience, as we often do, by unlearning disobedience. Thus He declared, "I delight to do thy will, O God" (Ps. 40:8). "My meat is to do the will of Him who sent Me" (Jn. 4:34).

The Savior, in His humanity, had to go through the experience of what it was to obey. "He denied Himself, He renounced His own will, He 'pleased not Himself' (Rom. 15:3). There was no insubordination in Him, nothing disinclined to God's law; instead, His obedience was voluntary and hearty. But by being 'made under the law' as Man, He 'learned' what Divine righteousness required of Him; by receiving the commandment to lay down His life (John 10:18), He 'learned' the extent of that obedience which holiness demanded. Again, as the God-man, Christ 'learned' obedience experimentally."<sup>51</sup>

Jesus did not learn obedience just by obeying God in an ordinary, everyday manner, "He learned obedience in the school of suffering" (NEB). As the incarnate Son who came to be our mediator, our high priest before God, it was absolutely necessary for the Savior to learn obedience through every conceivable experience of suffering, trial and temptation. His obedience, of course, was toward God's holy law; but, it was also an "obedience unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8). It was such an obedience that conquered sin. It was such

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<sup>51</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), 254.

an obedience that submitted to God's will throughout the most severe temptations and sufferings. This is precisely the type of obedience that author of Hebrews speaks of. "It is with reference to this suffering that Jesus was *made perfect*; indeed, what is said here is a reaffirmation of the teaching already given in 2:10 that Christ was made 'perfect through suffering.' This perfection was progressively achieved as he moved on toward the cross, which marked the consummation of his suffering and obedience.... What was essential was that starting like Adam, with a pure human nature, he should succeed where Adam had failed. His sufferings both tested and victoriously endured, attested his perfection, free from failure and defeat. This he himself dramatically declared by his triumphant utterance from the cross: 'It is finished' (Jn 19:30)."<sup>52</sup>

Thus, we see that our Lord's suffering was crucial for His priestly work, wherein He offered Himself as a sacrifice for sin. It was also essential for His priestly work of intercession on our behalf. "For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.... Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted" (Heb. 2:10, 17-18).

The Savior voluntarily placed Himself within the circle of human experience and was consecrated a merciful and faithful high priest through His own trials and sufferings (the Old Covenant high priest had his own sins and guilt to deal with and was only consecrated by the suffering and death of the clean animals which they offered in sacrifice at their consecration). "By His sufferings Christ became qualified and was solemnly appointed to be our Leader. It was by His sufferings that He vanquished all His and our foes, triumphing gloriously over them."<sup>53</sup> Jesus' own personal experience of severe trials, temptations and sufferings uniquely qualified Him to be a merciful and faithful high priest who would compassionately guide our highest interests. "The bond of brotherhood, the identity of suffering and sorrow, fitted Him to be touched with the feeling of our infirmities."<sup>54</sup> The Savior's fellowship in human suffering and His identification with our human mortal nature with all its weaknesses after the fall (except sin) makes Him the perfect priestly mediator between a holy God and sinful men. "The use of the perfect tense *peponthen* serves to emphasize that, though the temptation Christ suffered in the flesh is a thing of the past, yet its effect is permanent, the effect, namely, of compassion and understanding as he aids us in the hour of our temptations."<sup>55</sup>

(4) The Son of God had to suffer in order to actually bring to pass the salvation of many people. Evangelicals recognize that Jesus' suffering until death was absolutely necessary for the removal (expiation) of the guilt of sin and for turning away the wrath of God (propitiation) that was directed at the sinner. But what many fail to recognize is that the very source of our faith, sanctification and perseverance is found in the Lord's redemptive sufferings and glorious resurrection. Christ is "the author and finisher of our faith" (Heb. 12:2). He is "the captain of their salvation" made perfect through sufferings (Heb 2:10).

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<sup>52</sup> Phillip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 187-188.

<sup>53</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews*, 115.

<sup>54</sup> George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Atonement According to the Apostles* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, [1870] 1988), 337.

<sup>55</sup> Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 123, footnote 123.

The word (Gk. *archēgon*) translated “captain” (KJV, NKJV), “author” (NASB, NIV), “leader” (NEB) or “pioneer” (RSV) was used in the days of the apostles to describe the leader of a military regiment who not only issued orders to his troops, but also took the lead in battle, who by his own personal example and skill in battle encouraged and inspired his soldiers unto victory. This word “signifies one who is both the source or initiator and the leader (*archē* plus *agō*), one who first takes action and then brings those on whose behalf he has acted to the intended goal.”<sup>56</sup>

What the author of Hebrews is saying is that the Savior not only achieved a perfect redemption through His suffering but also leads us through our trials, temptations and suffering to glory. Our captain, or leader, who achieved salvation and glory through suffering, also, by virtue of our union with Him and His high priestly work, brings us safely through the battlefield of life. He achieved a perfect redemption in history when He lived on earth and He applies that perfect work to us throughout history.

The common evangelical Arminian or semi-Pelagian understanding of Christ’s suffering (that He makes salvation possible but not actual) makes Jesus’ leadership in salvation like a modern general who sits in his headquarters far behind the front looking at flags on a map waiting to see if his troops can achieve victory. We must reject all such humanistic nonsense in favor of the biblical concept of our Lord’s suffering; a suffering that secures redemption and the application of redemption toward God’s elect.

(5) Jesus is the perfect model for Christian suffering. If we become sorrowful through the various afflictions of this life, we must remember that the Savior, the Captain of our salvation, was exceedingly sorrowful before us and for us.

Before we look to Christ as the supreme example of how to endure suffering, it is important for us to face the reality that everyone who follows the Master must follow Him into suffering. This sober truth is taught throughout the New Testament. Our Lord told the disciples: “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you... Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (Jn. 15:18, 20). Peter tells believers that God has called us to eternal glory, “after you have suffered a while” (1 Pet. 5:10). He also speaks of Christians partaking of the Lord’s sufferings (1 Pet. 4:13). Paul tells the Corinthians that “the sufferings of Christ abound in us” (2 Cor. 1:5). He speaks about knowing “the fellowship of His sufferings” (Phil 3:10). Further, believers are called Christ’s body (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 12:12-27) and those who persecute the church are said to abuse the Lord Himself: “Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (Ac. 9:4). As followers of the Lord we are not only called to suffer *for* our Savior, but also, in a certain sense, we suffer *with* Him. There is a sharing or partnership with Jesus in His suffering. This truth does not mean that the redemptive efficacy of our Lord’s work is in any sense extended or shared by believers. Such a view would explicitly contradict the biblical teaching that Christ’s work was unique, perfect, complete, sufficient, once for all. It would also undermine the doctrine that the experiences, works, sufferings and so forth of Christians are never meritorious before God.

There are a number of things to note regarding the imitation of Christ in His suffering.

a) Our Lord suffered, yet He did not complain, murmur or question the loving kindness of His Father. His statement, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful even to death” (Mk. 14:34, Mt. 26:38), is a statement of fact to the disciples regarding His state and not a complaint against God or His providence. The true test of a person’s faith toward God often comes during times of suffering. When godly Job was told that all his possessions were either stolen or destroyed; that

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 100, footnote 88.

all his servants except one were killed; that his home was destroyed and his own children crushed to death under his house, God's Word says that "Job arose, tore his robe, and shaved his head; and fell to the ground and worshiped" (Job 1:20). Note this patriarch's beautiful statement of his dedication and faith to God in this severe trial. Job said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). The Holy Spirit comments on Job's behavior by saying, "In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong" (Job 1:22).

Note that, like Jesus in His affliction, Job humbled himself, cast himself prostrate on the ground and looked to God. Also, like the Savior, Job had complete confidence in God's providence toward Him. He believed in Jehovah; he knew God's nature and character and thus gladly submitted to divine providence. Like Christ, Job had such a faith in God's loving providence for him that he even looks beyond the secondary causes of His affliction and keeps his eye of faith upon the first cause. "He does not say, 'The Lord gave, and the Sabeans and Chaldeans have taken away; God made me rich and the devil has made me poor;'"<sup>57</sup> but, "Jehovah who gave it has taken it away." The Savior did not complain about the unjust treatment that He was about to receive from wicked sinful men but said, "Father, I am willing to drink your cup. I will steadfastly submit to your will." Regarding Job's response to suffering Matthew Henry writes,

He adored God in both. When all was gone he fell down and worshipped. Note, Afflictions must not divert us from, but quicken us to, the exercises of religion. Weeping must not hinder sowing, nor hinder worshipping. He eyed not only the hand of God, but the name of God, in his afflictions, and gave glory to that: Blessed be the name of the Lord. He has still the same great and good thoughts of God that ever he had, and is as forward as ever to speak them forth to his praise; he can find in his heart to bless God even when he takes away as well as when he gives. Thus must we sing both of mercy and judgment, Ps. ci. 1. [1.] He blesses God for what was given, though now it was taken away. When our comforts are removed from us we must thank God that ever we had them and had them so much longer than we deserved. Nay, [2.] He adores God even in taking away, and gives him honour by a willing submission; nay, he gives him thanks for good designed him by his afflictions, for gracious supports under his afflictions, and the believing hopes he had of a happy issue at last.<sup>58</sup>

When we experience suffering, do we acknowledge that we are unworthy and unprofitable servants that apart from Christ do not really deserve any good from God at all? Do we praise God for all the good things He has given us? Do we thankfully acknowledge that God has the right to take away as well as to give? Do we look to the joy beyond the storm and understand that no matter what we are going through, God in His providential dealing with us has our own best interest in mind? Beloved, suffering is never easy and there is nothing wrong with shedding tears. But let us always respond to suffering like our Savior. Let us look beyond our own tears to the bloody cross and thank God that nothing can "separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:39).

Oh, that God would strengthen our faith to endure suffering like many of the saints and martyrs of old! By way of illustration note how the Scottish divine John Brown speaks of his father's response to suffering: "We found my father standing before us, erect, his hands clenched in his black hair, his eyes full of misery and amazement, his face white as that of the dead. He

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<sup>57</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 3:12.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

frightened us. He saw this, or else his intense will had mastered his agony, for taking his hands from his head, he said, slowly and gently, ‘Let us give thanks,’ and turned to a little sofa in the room; there lay our mother dead... Then were seen in full action his keen, passionate nature, his sense of mental pain, and his supreme will, instant and unsparing, making himself and his terrified household give thanks in the midst of such a desolation—and for it.”<sup>59</sup> Note also how the godly father of Richard Cameron (leader and martyr of the strict Presbyterian Covenanters during the killing times in Scotland) handled great sorrow. James King Hewison writes, “The next act of brutality was the conveyance of the head and hands of Cameron into the cell where his old father still lay for unrepented conventicling [i.e. having unauthorized religious meetings contrary to the prelatical establishment]. The devout Covenanter tenderly lifted them and said: ‘I know them; they are my son’s, my dear son’s: it is the Lord, good is the will of the Lord, who cannot wrong me nor mine, but has made goodness and mercy to follow us all our days.’”<sup>60</sup>

There are really only two approaches in this world to suffering: the biblical approach of trust, submission and worship or the unregenerate approach of either complaining against God or denial. The Israelites in the desert were continually complaining and accusing God of bringing hardship and disaster their way (cf. Ex. 15:24; 16:2; 17:3; Numb 11:1, 4; 14:2; 16:3; 20:3; 21:5). In Numbers 11:1 we observe the covenant people complaining audibly before God. They want the LORD to hear them because they believe their situation (i.e. their hardship) is His fault. The LORD hears; His anger is aroused; and He sends down fire on the outskirts of their camp. Their response to suffering revealed that they really did not trust in Jehovah or understand His nature and character. Instead of blessing God in the midst of trials, they cursed Him. They believed that God was out to get them. They did not trust in Jehovah’s gracious character, a character which as Paul so beautifully states, works all things “together for good to them who love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose” (Rom 8:28). Similarly, Job’s wife did not have the faith of Job. When she heard that her husband was struck with painful boils from head to foot, she said, “Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die.” (Job 2:9).

Often we see the outlook of unbelief around us when people are quick to blame God for their problems and suffering. Although there is nothing wrong with acknowledging God’s special providence over the affairs of men and even over the bad things that befall us, it is extremely unchristian to blame God for the evil consequences of secondary causes. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* says that although God ordains everything that comes to pass, yet He is not the author of sin (3:1). When people blame God for: the horrors of Auschwitz; their wife dying in a car crash; their son dying of cancer; the closing of a factory; or, even the suffering caused by a natural calamity such as a hurricane or tsunami, they are shifting the blame that man deserves for his sin and guilt, both original and actual, to God who is infinitely holy, just and good.

The other pagan approach to suffering comes primarily from eastern philosophy. This outlook essentially denies that suffering exists. Suffering we are told only exists in the realm of illusion (e.g., Hinduism, Mary Baker Eddy, etc). Buddhism acknowledges that suffering exists, but attributes it merely to a subjective state of craving or grasping on the part of man. Therefore, people can completely eliminate suffering through right contemplation which eliminates craving and its consequent suffering. Only biblical Christianity deals with the root cause of suffering: sin

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<sup>59</sup> From a church bulletin published by Great Commission Publications, Norcross, GA.

<sup>60</sup> James King Hewison, *The Covenanters: A History of the Church in Scotland from the Reformation to the Revolution* (Glasgow: John Smith and Son, 1908), 1:335.

and the consequences of the fall. The Lord Jesus Christ dealt with sin, guilt and suffering head on when He suffered and died on the cross.

b) Christ endured suffering by looking to His future victory with the eye of faith. This point is emphasized by the author of Hebrews who tells us to look to “Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (12:22). Our Lord had the perfect attitude for the endurance of suffering. As the supreme exponent of faith, He did not waver in His suffering because He trusted God’s Word regarding the future joy that awaited Him.

The pagan lives in the present. His attitude is “eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor. 15:32). His future goals in life are all rooted in this world: riches, fame, pleasure, leisure, possessions and so forth. The unbeliever faces suffering with anger and/or despair because his worldview does not really give life any meaning.

The Bible-believing Christian, however, has a completely different perspective. He is willing to deny himself and take up the cross daily because he knows that his life is part of a greater cause beyond himself that lasts into eternity. He knows that beyond the veil of tears lies the face of God; the waiting open arms of the Savior; the paradise of the presence of God. “Thus the apostle Paul could testify that he had suffered the loss of all things which this world counts dear, regarding them as refuse, in order that he might win Christ (Phil. 3:8). This same intensity of purpose was characteristic of the victors of the faith who had competed prior to Christ’s coming. Moses for example,...considered the agonies of the race greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt precisely because he looked away from present sufferings and fixed his attention on him who was the reward, for ‘he endured as seeing him who is invisible’” [Heb. 11:26-27].<sup>61</sup>

While the Mediator suffered He meditated on the promises of God’s Word. “Our Lord believed the promises made to Him: He believed that He was to be ‘exalted, and extolled and made very high’—that He was to ‘see the travail of His soul, and be satisfied’—that ‘his soul should not be left in the separate state, nor His body see corruption’—‘that God would show Him the path of life;’ and, believing this, He ‘did not fail, nor was he discouraged;’—He persevered, amid inconceivable difficulties and sufferings, till He could say, ‘It is finished.’”<sup>62</sup> If we are to endure suffering, we must “let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:9). As Peter says, believers must “rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy” (1 Pet. 4:13).

Beloved, when you suffer do you follow the example of our Lord? Do you meditate on the precious promises of God? Are you patiently enduring suffering, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of your body (Rom. 8:23)? Paul says, “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:16-18). As Christians we must deal with suffering by looking at the past, the sufferings of our Lord and His perfect redemption achieved; and, we also must look with hope toward the future when our redemption in the broad sense of the term is completed.

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<sup>61</sup> Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 522.

<sup>62</sup> John Brown, *Hebrews* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1862] 1964), 613.

“Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 Jn. 3:2).

c) Our Lord suffered as an innocent man. It is one thing to endure suffering when we deserve it and quite another to suffer injustice at the hands of evildoers or persecutors. If we are to suffer as Christians, we must suffer as holy people if we want to glorify God. Peter writes, “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evil doer, or as a busy body in other people’s matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter” (1 Pet. 4:15-16).

“Christians in the apostolic age were not all saints: Paul had to deal with a case of incest at Corinth (1 Cor. v. 1-8), and more than once (e.g., 1 Cor. v. 9-13; vi. 8-11; Eph. iv. 28; v. 3-12) found it useful to warn his correspondents against contact with, or relapse into, immoral behavior.”<sup>63</sup> Peter speaks of such professing Christians who were guilty of scandalous behavior. “There is very little comfort in sufferings when we bring them upon ourselves by our own sin and folly. It is not the suffering, but the cause, that makes the martyr.”<sup>64</sup>

One of the reasons that the church spread so widely throughout the Roman Empire was the calm, resolute and brave manner in which believers suffered abuse, torture and death at the hands of the Roman state. When the masses saw Christians suffering *unjustly*, many people wanted to know about the faith of these martyrs. As secular humanistic states pass more and more laws that are explicitly antithetical to biblical Christianity (e.g., pro-sodomite and anti-family legislation), we may be called to suffer innocently in imitation of Christ.

## Jesus’ Response to Suffering

Although we have already considered some details about how our Savior responded to suffering in our examination of Christ as the perfect model of suffering, we need to go back to the gospel accounts to examine the Mediator’s response in more detail. There are two areas regarding His response that we should note for our own edification.

(1) When the blessed Master was about to enter this great struggle, He sought the companionship of Christian friends to watch and pray with Him. During His ministry Jesus would often go to a secluded place to pray and commune with His father. On this occasion He takes the remaining eleven apostles with Him. Near the entrance to the garden, He leaves eight disciples to watch and pray and takes the three closest to Him (Peter, James and John) further into the garden nearer to Him. “They move on into the Garden of Gethsemane, where the Lord, as it were, surrounds Himself with two rings of prayer supporters, as a king in battle might be surrounded by his body-guard.”<sup>65</sup>

In a time of trouble we want someone with us. During extreme anguish we often do not want to be alone. Under such trying circumstances we often do not even want to talk with our companions; we simply want company. Jesus was truly a man like us. He did not want to be alone. “Being human himself, he stood in need not only of food, drink, clothing, shelter, and sleep, but also human fellowship. Cf. Heb. 4:15.”<sup>66</sup> “When Jesus went to Gethsemane there were two things he sorely desired. He wanted *human fellowship* and he wanted *God’s fellowship*.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> J. N. D. Kelley, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1969), 189.

<sup>64</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6:1032.

<sup>65</sup> R. Alan Cole, *Mark* (Lancaster, England: Inter Varsity Press, 1961), 218.

<sup>66</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 916-917.

<sup>67</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, [1954] 1875), 343.

When Christ entered into a severe trial He sought the aid and comfort of His closest friends. This practice should be a lesson to every one of us.

Every one of us is going to go through trials. How are we going to deal with them? Are we going to follow our heathen culture and seek secular humanistic therapy to raise our self-esteem and provide us with Prozac? Are we going to grit our teeth and bear it because we don't want to appear weak and vulnerable to others? Or, are we willing to follow our Savior's example and seek the support of solid Christian friends?

Regarding our Lord's practice of taking along his disciples to watch and pray, there are some important questions to consider.

a) Why did Jesus take Peter, James and John into the garden to be much nearer to Him than the other apostles? Although the text does not speak specifically to this issue, it is not hard to conclude from a study of the gospels that these three were chosen as *special witnesses of Christ's suffering*.<sup>68</sup> Among the twelve apostles our Lord chose an inner circle, consisting of Peter, James and John, that was especially close to Him, to which He showed certain events that the other disciples did not directly witness. These three were with the Savior at the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mk. 5:37; Lk. 8:51), on the mount of transfiguration (Mt. 17:1; Mk. 9:2; Lk 9:28) and here in the garden of Gethsemane (Mt. 26:40; Mk. 14:37).

The choice of Peter makes sense in that he played an important role among the apostles and would be the chief apostle to the Jews. Barclay writes, "In the gospel records Peter stands out as the spokesman of the twelve. It was Peter who asked the meaning of a difficult saying (Matt. 15:15; Luke 12:41). It was Peter who asked how often he must forgive (Matt. 18:21), and who inquired what was to be the reward of those who had left all to follow Jesus (Matt. 19:27). It was Peter who asked about the fig tree which had withered away (Mark 11:21) and about the meaning of the things which Jesus had said about the approaching end (Mark 13:3). It was to Peter the Jews came to ask if Jesus paid his taxes (Matt. 17:24). It was Peter who answered when Jesus asked who had touched him in the crowd (Luke 8:45). It was Peter who asked questions of the risen Christ (John 21:20-22)."<sup>69</sup> Note also that Peter was the first person in history to publicly profess that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the living God (Mt. 16:16). Thus, it is fitting for him to be among the first disciples to witness the depths of the Savior's vicarious suffering.

The apostle John was a business partner with Peter in the fishing trade (Lk. 5:10) and a close personal friend of Peter in life and as an apostle. "We find John going to Peter's house after the Sabbath service in Capernaum (Mark 1:29); and in the last days we find Peter and John being sent out together to prepare the Passover feast for Jesus and the other disciples (Luke 22:8)... [I]n Acts in the early days of the church, Peter and John were always acting together, and Peter was always the spokesman for the two."<sup>70</sup> In the fourth gospel John is repeatedly called the disciple whom Jesus loved (Jn. 13:23; 19:26; 21:7; 20:7). At the last supper we find John reclining at the right hand of Christ with his head resting on the Lord's chest (Jn. 13:25). Given John's very close relationship to Peter and his special designation as "the disciple whom Jesus loved," we can understand his inclusion in this inner circle.

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<sup>68</sup> "*proelthōn micron* suggests that he remained within earshot, so that Peter, James and John, unlike the other disciples, were witnesses to the prayer, though how much they saw and heard before they fell asleep can only be guessed. The fact that the contents of the prayer found their way into Christian tradition may suggest that they did not go to sleep immediately, though it is also possible that Jesus himself talked about the Gethsemane experience in his post-resurrection meetings with his disciples." (R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 583).

<sup>69</sup> William Barclay, *The Master's Men: Character Sketches of the Disciples* (New York: Walker and Company [1959] 1985), 16.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 31-32.

The other witness to our Lord's suffering in Gethsemane was John's older brother James. "That he occupied a leading place among the apostles is beyond doubt. He was the first of them to gain the martyr's crown (Acts 12:2). In every list of the apostles he is in the first three."<sup>71</sup>

These three apostles had the privilege of being special historical eyewitnesses of Christ's anguish in the garden. The apostle John alludes to the important apostolic role as witnesses to the redemptive work of our Lord in 1 John 1:1-3, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—the life manifested, and we have seen and bear witness, and declare to you, that you may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ."

Another reason that our Lord wants the disciples near Him is to help them prepare for the severe test before them. Before the Savior moves a stone's throw (i.e. about thirty yards, Lk. 22:41; Matthew and Mark both say "He went a little farther" [Mt. 26:37; Mk. 14:35]) beyond the three disciples, He says, "stay here and watch (Mk. 14:34) with Me" (Mt. 26:38). The word (*grēgoreite*) translated as "watch" in its primary meaning means to stay awake or not fall sleep. The verb is an imperative in the present tense which could be translated "stay awake," "be watching," or "continually watch." The verb has a second meaning which means "be on guard;" "protect yourself from danger by looking out for its approach at any moment."<sup>72</sup> "The verb here, *grēgoreite*, *watch* ought to have reminded His disciples of the parable of the door-keeper, told them just before (xiii. 34-37). The task of the door-keeper was to watch, and the Lord rounded off the parable by giving this as a general injunction to His disciples."<sup>73</sup> Later when our Lord finds the disciples sleeping He will say, "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation" (Mt. 26:41; Mk. 14:38). Given the addition of prayer to the second imperative to watch, we should not view the command to watch as merely a command to be on guard in case Judas comes with armed intruders. Although there may be an element of sentry duty to Christ's command, the main teaching deals with watchfulness regarding temptation. While Jesus wanted company during His severe trial, His main concern is not for Himself but for His weak disciples.

It may be that the eight disciples near the entrance were to keep watch by looking outward so that the Savior would not be interrupted by Judas and the armed thugs who were to arrest Him. The inner circle that was near Christ was to stay alert so they could watch Jesus in His suffering and learn from the Master how to deal with temptation. Interestingly our Lord does not say "pray for Me," but "pray with me." The Savior knew that His arrest, trial and crucifixion would coincide with a severe testing for His disciples; that like sheep His friends would be scattered (Mk. 14:27; Mt. 26:31).

As believers who live in a pagan, corrupt culture, we, like the apostles, must look both ways. We must stand upon our watch-tower and carefully watch against temptations and sins so that we are not surprised by them, caught off-guard and overtaken by them. While we watch outwardly against the world, the flesh and the devil we must also always be watching Christ. If we neglect our relationship with Jesus; if we neglect our communion with Him; if we grow cold or lukewarm in our love and dedication toward Him; if we do not cultivate the means of grace, then we can only blame ourselves when temptations overtake us and we fall into sin. Beloved, stay close to the Savior, watch Him, study Him, pray with Him, trust in Him and you will not become the prey of darkness, dejection, discouragement and despair. Spurgeon's comments on

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 154.

<sup>72</sup> J. A. Alexander, *Mark* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1858] 1960), 386.

<sup>73</sup> R. Alan Cole, *Mark*, 219.

this text are excellent. He bids us, “Look at Christ. ‘Consider him that endured such contradictions of sinners against himself.’ Watch the Savior, and watch with the Savior. Be familiar with the passion of your Lord. Get right up to the cross. Do not be satisfied with that, but get the cross on your shoulders; get yourself bound to the cross in the spirit of the apostle when he said, ‘I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live’ [Gal. 2:20]... Get into the side of Christ; it is a cleft of rock in which you may hide until the tempest is over-passed. Live in Christ; live near to Christ; and then, let the conflict come, and you will overcome even as he overcame, and rising up from your sweat and from your agony you will go forth to meet even death itself with a calm expression on your brow, saying, ‘My Father, not as I will, but as thou wilt.’”<sup>74</sup> (We will go into more detail regarding our Lord’s commands under the section “The Imperatives of Gethsemane.”)

b) Another question we need to answer is: Were the disciples faithful to our Lord’s injunctions in the garden? Sadly, although the Savior had commanded His disciples to stay awake in order to watch and pray with Him, He returns after a time to find them sleeping: “Then He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, ‘What? Could you not watch with Me one hour?’” (Mt. 26:40). Although Christ addresses Peter, the plural form of the verb indicates He was addressing all three disciples. Interestingly, in Mark’s account Jesus does not call Peter “Cephas,” but rather “Simon,” for Peter was not at this time acting like a rock. That the disciples were very sleepy is understandable, for it was very late at night; not long before they had had a large meal; and they were living under extreme tension. Luke says, “He found them sleeping from sorrow” (22:45). The disciples were suffering from emotional exhaustion.

The rhetorical question addressed to the three disciples is a gentle, yet painful, rebuke to these disciples who had all boasted of being so dedicated to the Master that they were all willing to die for Him (Mt. 26:28-31). “This brave, mighty Peter had promised to die with Jesus and now he cannot even stay awake at his Master’s bidding!”<sup>75</sup> Clearly, the rebuke is not one of anger but of disappointment. “The remarkable thing is that the rebuke of Jesus is so gentle, and that even in his agony and distress Jesus can think of the needs of these sleepers.”<sup>76</sup> That the primary reason our Lord brings these disciples along for their own edification is the amazing fact “that in the midst of an unparalleled agony Jesus twice more came to look after his three vulnerable disciples and to warn them of their danger of failure in the struggle which was about to overwhelm them.”<sup>77</sup> “That slumber of theirs must have been *greatly rebuked by their Savior’s* kindness to them...[O]ur Lord came to his disciples three times, and on the third occasion he found them still heavy with sleep, so he sat down beside them, and said to them, ‘sleep on now, and take your rest.’ There he sat, patiently waiting for the traitor’s arrival;—not expecting any help or sympathy from his disciples, but just watching over them as they would not watch with him, praying for them as they would not pray for themselves, and letting them take another nap while he made himself ready to meet Judas and the rabble throng that would so soon surround him.”<sup>78</sup>

In this account we see the Savior magnified even in one of His most desperate hours; and, we also see that men can never attain salvation by works. Roman Catholics worship the apostles, especially Peter whom they falsely claim as the first Pope. Romanists even worship supposed relics of the apostles and argue that these men were so righteous that they have an excess of

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<sup>74</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Garden of the Soul,” 3:87.

<sup>75</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1041.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 519.

<sup>78</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “Jesus in Gethsemane,” 3:96.

merit needed to attain eternal life. They argue that we should seek the excess merits from these saints so that we can avoid the tortures of purgatory. Yet, is it not clear that even the greatest of Christians, apart from the imputed righteousness of Christ, is a failure? In our Lord's supreme time of need, when He was suffering so much that drops of blood fell from His face, the apostles were sleeping. Yes, they were napping while the Savior was bleeding and soon they would all forsake Him and flee (Mk. 14:50; Mt. 26:56). This scene is a beautiful picture of the Savior's love for His people. It proves that we can only find salvation in Christ who overcame when we failed; who conquered temptation while we were careless and slumbered; who stared death and hell in the face and didn't flinch while we fled as cowards. In Gethsemane we see so clearly that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. What a great and loving Savior that we serve.

The gospel also shows us that although Jesus sought the companionship of His closest friends, he truly suffered alone. Although our Lord led His three closest friends into the garden, He withdrew from them a stone's throw. He knew He had to drink the cup of wrath alone. He knew that He was the one and only offering that would be acceptable to God. "At last it came to this, that there was only one observer. The chosen three had fallen asleep, God's unsleeping eye alone looked down upon him. The Father's ear alone was attentive to the piteous cries of the Redeemer."<sup>79</sup>

(2) The Lord responded to this severe anguish by going to God in prayer. There are three things to consider regarding Jesus' prayer: a) the manner of the prayer; b) the content and object of this prayer; and, c) the Savior's response to this prayer.

a) When we look at the prayer of Christ in Gethsemane, one of the first things we notice is its intensity. This prayer arose out of fierce struggle. We see this intensity in our Lord's posture of prayer. A common posture of prayer among the covenant people was to stand (e.g., Gen. 18:22; 1 Sam 1:26; Neh. 9:4-5; Mt. 6:5; Lk. 18:3, 11, 18), often with the hands spread out, lifted toward heaven (e.g., Ex. 9:29; 17:11-12; 1 Kg. 8:22; Neh. 8:6; Ps. 63:4; 134:2; 141:2; Isa. 1:15; Lam. 2:19; Hab. 3:10; Lk. 24:50; 1 Tim 2:8; Ja. 4:8) and at times accompanied by the lifting heavenward of the eyes (e.g., Ps. 25:15; 121:1; 123:1, 2; 141:8; 145:15; Jn. 11:41; 17:1; Mk. 6:41). There are also many examples in Scripture of bowing one's head (e.g., Gen. 24:48; Ex. 12:27; 2 Chron. 29:30; Lk. 24:5); kneeling (2 Chron. 6:13; Ps. 95:6; Isa. 45:23; Dan. 6:10; Mt. 17:14; Mk. 1:40; Lk. 22:41; Ac. 7:60; 9:40; 2:36; 21:5; Eph. 3:14) and falling down prostrate with one's face upon the ground (Gen. 17:3; 24:26; Num. 14:5; 16:4, 22, 45; 22:13, 34; Dt. 9:18, 25, 26; Josh. 5:14; Judg. 13:20; Neh. 8:6; Ezek. 1:28; 3:23; 9:8; 11:13; 43:3; 44:4; Dan 8:17; Mt. 26:39; Mk. 7:25; 14:35; Lk. 5:12; Rev. 1:17; 11:16).<sup>80</sup>

Kneeling as a posture of prayer signifies humility toward God and a willingness to submit to God's will. This point is brought out beautifully in Philippians where the Lordship and universal authority of Christ is to be acknowledged by the fact that "every knee should bow...and every tongue...confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (2:10-11). "In Acts, kneeling is identified as the prayer posture only on occasions where the context suggests that there might be a particular intensity to the prayer."<sup>81</sup> Falling down with one's face on the ground is often a visible manifestation of awe on the part of people who have witnessed an amazing supernatural event or have experienced God's special presence (Mt. 17:6; Lk. 24:5; 1 Cor. 14:25; Rev. 7:11; 11:16). In the text before us, falling down underlines Jesus' utter dependence on God in a time of

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<sup>79</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Garden of the Soul," 3:80.

<sup>80</sup> For an excellent discussion of posture in prayer see William Hendriksen, *Thessalonians, Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1955, 57] 1979), 2:103-105.

<sup>81</sup> John Nollard, *Luke 18:35-24:53* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 1083.

severe distress and temptation. By His posture the Savior accommodated Himself to His present humiliation. In Psalm 22 our Lord is set before us prophetically as a worm writhing in humiliation and agony. “But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised by the people” (v. 6).

We learn from Christ and Scripture that posture in prayer is important, for it helps us abase ourselves before God. Our posture, of course, must reflect the posture of our hearts before God. Muslims, for example, who are full of pride and hatred toward the Son of God, are very fond of their prayer mats and vain prostrations. However, since they reject the divinity of Christ and the message of the cross, they prostrate themselves to demons, to gods of death and destruction.

Note also that our Lord’s prayer was very personal. Throughout Jesus’ ministry He always addressed God in prayer as Father (the only exception is Mk. 15:34 and Matthew 27:46 when the Savior is hanging on the cross forsaken by God because of the curse of the elect’s imputed sin); and, in the Lord’s prayer believers are taught to address God in prayer corporately as “our Father” (Mt. 6:9). In the garden, however, we have the only inscripturated example of the Lord saying “My Father” (Mt. 26:39). Mark, whose main source for what occurred was Peter, even preserves the Aramaic “Abba, Father” at the beginning of Jesus’ prayer (Mk. 14:36). The fact that the disciples were to address God as “our Father” while Christ would pray “My Father,” coupled with the distinction between “My Father” and “your Father” in His discourses, indicates that the use of “*Abba*” in Mark’s account expresses a special, unique relationship to God. He is the one and only begotten Son, while we are all sons by adoption, by virtue of our union with Him.

Interestingly, in the literature of early Palestinian Judaism, there is no evidence that the Jews addressed God in prayer as “Abba” or as “our Father.” To the Jewish mind at that period of their history, “the use of this familiar household term would have been considered disrespectful in prayer, and therefore inconceivable.”<sup>82</sup> The Old Testament, however, does offer precedent for addressing God as Father. The song of Moses says, “Is he not your Father, who bought you?” (Dt. 32:6). Speaking of the Immanuel to come the psalmist wrote: “He shall cry to Me, You are My Father, My God, and the rock of my salvation.” Isaiah 63:16 reads: “You, O Lord, are our Father; our Redeemer from everlasting is Your name” (cf. Isa. 64:7; Jer. 31:9; Mal. 1:9; Ps. 68:6; 27:10; 2 Sam. 7:14, 14). Jesus, then, restores the personal covenantal language of the Old Covenant church to the New Covenant people of God after it had been lost to formalism and human tradition. Christ’s example is followed by the divinely inspired Apostles, such as Paul who says, “But you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God” (Rom. 8:15-16).

b) As we examine the context or object of Christ’s prayer, there are a number of important things to consider.

First, in Mark’s account the prayer begins with a confession of faith or a declaration of full confidence in God’s power and goodness. The Savior says “All things are possible for You” (Mk. 14:36). Jesus is saying: “Father I believe that you have the power and authority to do anything.” By this confession our Lord is not saying that God can do anything, including evil, for the Master knows that God can only act according to His nature and character. Further, he immediately limits this possibility by acknowledging that everything must occur according to God’s decretive will. “It is accordingly, in the spirit of complete confidence and submission that

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<sup>82</sup> William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 518.

he makes his petition.”<sup>83</sup> “In Mark ‘All things are possible to Thee’ means ‘All things that thou willest are possible.’”<sup>84</sup>

Second, from start to finish the prayer of the Savior is conditional; it is always conditioned upon the will of God. Matthew’s account says, “If it is possible, let this cup pass from Me” (Mt. 26:39). Luke reads, “If it is Your will, take this cup away from Me” (22:42). All three synoptic gospels conclude this petition with: “nevertheless not My will, but Yours be done” (Lk. 22:42; cf. Mt. 26:39; Mk. 14:36).

Scholars who see in this prayer a tension between the will of the Son and the will of the Father misunderstand the text. Jesus according to His human nature is asking God if there is any other way besides the bloody cross to remove the guilt and penalty of sin. There is never even a hint that He was having second thoughts or was unwilling even for a moment to obey His Father. “Jesus’ desire was conditioned upon the will of God, and he resolutely refused to set his will in opposition to the will of the Father. Fully conscious that his mission entailed submission to the horror of the holy wrath of God against sin and rebellion, the will of Jesus clasped the transcendently and sacred will of God.”<sup>85</sup>

The human nature of Christ wanted to avoid the intense suffering set before him *only* if it was according to God’s will. Alfred Nevin writes, “The prayer of Christ was, as it were, taken back, before it was entirely uttered. It must be remembered that He who spake these words, having two distinct natures in one person, had a human will as well as Divine. *Nevertheless*, inasmuch as I have entered into covenant engagements, and have become surety for sinners, inasmuch ‘for this cause came I unto this hour’ and to offer up atoning sacrifice in my death is the great design of all the Divine decrees and operations which have brought me to this point; inasmuch as without this sacrifice, the oracles of ancient prophecy will be falsified, and the redemption of men’s souls, which is precious, cease forever: *not my will*, not the will of my human nature, but *thine*--the will of God, (as it is written concerning me,) *which I delight to do*, let that *be done*, (Ps. xi 7, 8,) at whatever expense of agony.”<sup>86</sup> Once the weak and finite human nature of Jesus understands, the matter is settled and cannot be altered; He embraces it.

The only way that we can begin to understand our Lord’s petition is to examine the great and mysterious truth that our Lord had two wills, a human and a divine will. As God, the Savior obviously had a will in complete harmony with the Father. But, as a man who was finite and limited in knowledge and understanding, Jesus needed reassurance that the road to Golgotha was the only way to secure man’s redemption. His prayer indicates human anguish and weakness. It does not indicate any desire to contradict God’s will, for it always presupposes absolute surrender to the Father’s will.

We see in this amazing portion of Scripture not only incontrovertible evidence of the hypostatic union of the two natures (divine and human) in Christ, but also absolute proof that the only way to enter heaven is by faith in the atoning death of Jesus. Once God of His own good pleasure decided to save a people for Himself, the only way to save them was by the suffering and death of His only begotten Son.

Third, we are told that the Savior made virtually the same request to the Father three times. Matthew writes, “So then He left them, went away again, and prayed the third time,

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<sup>83</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 588.

<sup>84</sup> Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker [1915] 1982), 370.

<sup>85</sup> William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 518-519.

<sup>86</sup> Alfred Nevin, *Popular Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke*, 634.

saying the same words” (26:44). What this means is that Christ’s prohibition against vain repetition in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 6:7) does not condemn all repetition in prayer, but only repetition that is not honest, sincere, attentive and from the heart. It is very common for people in churches which use prayer books week after week, for people to mumble through the prayers while their minds are drifting from one profane thing to another. Such repetition is “vain repetition.” It is very disrespectful to God to let our minds wander in prayer, as if communicating with Him were not a great privilege, or as if it were something unimportant. “Those who teach that we should pray but once, and not repeat the petition that we present to the Lord, cannot quote our Saviour’s example in support of their theory, for thrice on that dread night he offered the same supplication, and even used the same language. Paul, also, like his Master, ‘besought the Lord thrice’ that the ‘thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan’ might depart from him”<sup>87</sup>

Some of the Puritans, in their zeal to combat the prayer books and vain repetitions of the Anglican Church, went too far in their contentions, even forbidding the reciting of the Lord’s prayer in public worship. While we must always be on guard against the leaven of Romanism, Anglo-Catholicism, James Jordanism and the sacerdotal high-church movement in modern Presbyterianism (the Federal Vision, paedocommunion, the weekly use of prayer books in public worship rather than as aids to worship, the church calendar, etc), we must not overstep the clear teaching of Scripture that repeating the same words from the heart is lawful.

When we are going through a severe trial we must look at the Savior agonizing and praying in the garden. His example shows us that if God does not immediately grant our petitions, we must not be discouraged, grow weary, or give up. The Lord teaches us to prevail in prayer. So, then, it is not a superfluous repetition of the words if unanswered prayer is met with further fervent requests, even if we ask a third or fourth time.

Note the teaching of our Lord on the persistence in prayer from Luke 18:1-8: “Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, saying: ‘There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, “Get justice for me from my adversary.” And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, “Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.”’” Then the Lord said, ‘Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily.’”

c) One thing that we must not neglect as we survey this wondrous scene is our Lord’s response to this struggle. After He knelt and then fell to the ground in agony and repeatedly petitioned His Father with tears and bloody sweat, we see an amazing calmness in the Savior. After this battle, which afflicted His soul until it was near death, Christ stands up, walks over to the disciples, graciously allows them to continue in their slumber, then sits down and waits to be arrested. Only moments before He had repeatedly cried out, “If it is possible let this cup pass from Me.” Yet, now immediately after this scene of prostrate agony and devotion, Jesus is tranquil and calm. He tells the apostles in an ordinary, matter of fact manner, “The hour has come; behold, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going. See, My betrayer is at hand” (Mk. 14:41b). “Away he goes, so calm and collected that unjust accusations cannot extort a reply from him; and though beset on every hand yet is he led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opens not his mouth.

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<sup>87</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 387.

That was a magnificent calmness of mind that sealed his lips, and kept him passive before his foes.”<sup>88</sup>

How do we account for this amazing calm after the storm? Jesus achieved this profound peace, this splendid victory because He had faith in God and He was happy to accept God’s will. These two things, of course, are intimately connected. When we pray we must have faith, trust and a full confidence in God. This trust presupposes that we have studied our Bibles and understand who God is. This trust in God (His nature and character and the promises that flow from that character) enables us to place ourselves fully in His hands and accept His will, whatever it is. This faith is the reason that martyrs can walk to the gibbet of execution singing Psalms with joy.

May God enable us to imitate our precious Savior in His prayer, faith and perfect obedience.

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<sup>88</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Garden of the Soul,” 3:85-86.