

The Bitter Cup

Three Hours For Eternity

By
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Text:

“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 farther, 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.” (Matthew 26: 36-39)

“And he went forward a little, and fell on the ground, and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt.” (Mark 14: 35-36)

“And he came out, and went, as he was wont, to the mount of Olives; and his disciples also followed him. And when he was at the place, he said unto them, Pray that ye enter not into temptation. And he was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed, Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.” (Luke 22: 39-44)

“Then said Jesus unto Peter, Put up thy sword into the sheath: the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?” (John 18: 11)

All four gospels give testimony to our Lord’s prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane and His plea to the Father concerning the “cup.” Only Mark provides the commentary which sheds further light on what the nature of the cup was: *“and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.”*

This “cup,” or as Mark explained, the “hour,” about which Christ petitioned the Father has long puzzled Bible readers. Was our Lord, when facing certain torture and death, somehow shrinking from the idea of going to the cross? Most certainly not! Then, what caused Him to utter such a prayer?

When considering scriptures which do not immediately yield to an obvious explanation, it is often wise to eliminate any interpretation which contradicts clear Bible doctrine. In other words, we must search the scriptures and rule out the things that it *cannot* mean. So, let’s begin with the question: Did the Saviour fear the terror of death on the cross? That cannot be. In 712 BC, Isaiah prophesied of our Lord’s death; *“I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting. For the Lord GOD will help me; therefore shall I not be confounded: therefore have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed”* (Isaiah 50: 6-7). This was a decision which was settled by the Godhead in eternity past, for He is declared to be *“the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.”* (Revelation 13: 8)

Was it His fear of being betrayed by one of His own disciples? Again, we must consult the scriptures. Judas Iscariot was the treasurer, about whom was said, *“he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein”* (John 12: 6). His character was fully known by the Master: *“Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?”* (John 6: 70). So, the betrayal by the “*son of perdition*” (John 17: 12), came as no surprise to the Lord.

Luke observed that Christ, *“being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground”* (Luke 22: 44). Gethsemane had been the garden of rest and prayer, and was His favorite spot for quiet reflection. But on this night it became the battleground of the ages, where all the hounds of hell were loosed by the devil to try to kill Him before He could go to the cross. The oppression was so intense that Christ’s sweat became as *“great drops of blood.”* So agonizing was the onslaught that *“there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him.”* (Luke 22: 43)

Luke, the beloved physician, was uniquely qualified to describe the mingling of blood with sweat. It was the intense agony of soul which caused the physiological phenomena of the blood migrating into the sweat glands. This was *spiritual warfare* of the most supernatural kind. According to renowned vascular surgeon, Dr. Leonard Hines, it is known in medical terms as *Hermatidrosis*, and occurs when emotional stress is so severe that the blood vessels burst in the *dermis* (underlying skin), resulting in the presence of blood in the sweat glands. The satanic oppression is what prompted Christ to warn the

three disciples to “*pray that ye enter not into temptation*” (Luke 22: 40), knowing that a mortal man would likely not survive such an attack.

It is also true that *all* of the disciples except John forsook the Lord in the ordeal of His seizure and scourging and at the mock trial before Pontius Pilate. Only John was present at the cross when the Master was crucified. Peter had returned earlier to linger by the fire in the courtyard, where, just as the Saviour prophesied, he would deny his Lord three times before the cock crew. However, he fled again afterward. The disciples were His friends, hand-picked brethren, to which Jesus would entrust the preaching of the gospel unto the ends of the earth. Did the sorrow of abandonment by His own grieve Him to the point of praying for deliverance from the “cup?” The answer to this query is also found in scripture. Jesus Christ came into this world as “*Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us*” (Matthew 1: 23). He is God; that is, He possessed the attribute of *omniscience*, which means that He knew all things, even the abandonment by the disciples, and yet He permitted the great drama of redemption to proceed to this point. So the sorrow of denial did not provoke His request of the Father.

If the terror of death, or the fear of betrayal, or the denial of His disciples was not the cause of His prayer, we must look elsewhere for some sense of understanding concerning this evening at Gethsemane. As was noted at the beginning of this message, Mark provided a clue as to what the *cup* truly was; he called it the *hour*. We may continue now by examining this *hour* and how it unfolded in the divine plan of redemption. Actually, the *hour* is comprised of three doctrinal elements: the

hour of divine agony, the *hour* of divine indignation, and the *hour* of divine triumph. Each of them involves some form of reconciliation, which requires the settling of enmity between parties or ideals which are contrary to one another. Let us begin . . .

The Hour of Divine Agony

In the Garden of Gethsemane, our Lord Jesus Christ was reconciled to sin. That evening, He who was “*holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners*” (Hebrews 7: 26), reconciled Himself to that hour when He would become “*sin for us, who knew no sin*” (2 Corinthians 5: 21). It was not just that the sinless Lamb of God would “*bear our sins in his own body on the tree*” (1 Peter 2: 24). The greatest agony (if we should dare allow ourselves to think of agony as “greater” or “lesser”), was knowing that on the cross as He *became sin*, communion with the Father would be temporarily broken. He knew the words that He would cry out in anguish, “*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*” (Matthew 27: 46). It is almost inconceivable for the human mind to comprehend the divine tragedy that would divide the Father from the Son. It was said that Martin Luther’s students once asked him to expound on the greatness of that hour. Finding no suitable response, the extraordinary teacher retired to his little prayer booth. After several days he addressed his class with the words, “God, forsaken of God. Who can comprehend it!”

In contemplation of the scene at Calvary to come, from eternity past, and to prophets before, the Son of God had surely

rehearsed the hour of divine agony. On the cross the blessed Redeemer would not, as some suppose, die as an *example*, that we might *crucify our evil tendencies and follow him*. No, on the cross He would pay in full the penalty of man's sins. Isaiah described the suffering He would endure:

“Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.” (Isaiah 53: 4-5, 10-11)

His death on the cross would require the sacrifice of holy blood. This is why He was born of a virgin. Were Christ born of a *human* father, He would have inherited the fallen sin nature of Adam; thus He would never have been allowed to go to the cross. A holy God cannot look upon sin! The only approach to an altar of forgiveness and the only acceptable offering for sin is blood:

“For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.” (Leviticus 17: 11)

Does this sacrifice of blood mean, as some have accused Bible believers, of practicing a *blood-thirsty* religion? Of course not. Nowhere in the Bible does God require the shedding of any man's blood on an altar. In the Old Testament, *atonement*, or the withholding of God's wrath against man's sin, was obtained through an offering of the blood of a lamb. The lamb was innocent, without blemish and clean. It was a perfect type of Christ to come, who would not merely secure atonement, but *remission*, or the taking away of man's sin and guilt:

“And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission.” (Hebrews 9: 22)

“Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood.” (Revelation 1: 5)

The Hour of Divine Indignation

On the cross, *sin* was reconciled to *justice*. Reading the Biblical account of the crucifixion without a doctrinal understanding of what God was actually accomplishing would cause any reasonable person to think that this hour was the greatest travesty of justice in the history of man; the greatest man who ever lived, crucified on a cross! Indeed, movies have attempted to portray the physical and mental brutality of the event, and millions have been touched by the account of Christ's death. But theologically, it was not a *travesty* at all but rather the *majesty* of God's plan of redemption!

At Calvary, Jesus Christ bore the full fury of God's wrath against the reprehensibility of sin. The Lord did not die as an example, but as the divine *substitute* under judgement in man's place:

"For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit" (1 Peter 3: 18)

On the cross, the Saviour paid the penalty for our wickedness, as the scriptures reveal: *"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord"* (Romans 6: 23). This payment was made with the shedding of His own blood:

"Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1: 18-19)

When Isaiah wrote, *"Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him,"* and *"He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied"* (Isaiah 53: 10, 11), please understand that he was not describing some strange, pagan ritual killing. He meant that Christ's suffering and death on the cross would satisfy God's demand for justice and judgement against sin.

You see, the sentence of death was pronounced upon sin: *"The wages of sin is death"* (Romans 3: 23). This *death* is eternal separation from God in hell. But He is also a God of

infinite love, so there had to be a way that God's righteous justice could be reconciled to His divine love for fallen man. Paul explained it this way:

"Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus." (Romans 3: 25-26)

Isaiah said that *"it pleased the LORD to bruise him."* That is, His righteous judgement was *propitiated* (satisfied) by His Son's shed blood. At Calvary, the death sentence was executed. Sin was rightly judged. In the Bible, the word *propitiation* has a two-fold meaning: in the Old Testament, it referred to the *mercy-seat* on the Ark of the Covenant; in the New Testament it symbolizes the satisfaction of justice at the place of mercy and forgiveness:

"For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4: 15-16)

After the Battle of Franklin, in Middle Tennessee during the War Between the States, Private Sam Watkins, a plain-spoken Confederate soldier, viewing the aftermath of the fierce firefight the night before, was reminded of the battle of the ages fought

and won by the Saviour at Mount Calvary. He would later write in his memoir:

“Justice hands the record of life to Mercy, and Mercy pleads with Jesus, and God, for his sake, receives him in his eternal home beyond the skies at last and forever.”
(*Co. Aytch*, by Samuel R. Watkins, 1882)

The Hour of Divine Triumph

From the cross to an empty tomb, the third and final episode of the epic of redemption is written. In the garden, Christ was reconciled to sin; on the cross, sin was reconciled to justice; and now, *death* is reconciled to *life everlasting!* According to the scriptures, *death* is the last enemy:

“For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming. Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.” (1 Corinthians 15: 22-26)

As the Saviour gave His life on the cross, having paid the price for our sin, He cried, *“It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost”* (John 19:30). The English word *finished* is from the Greek *teleo*, which means “it is consummated, accomplished.” Christ was not proclaiming that His life was over, but rather that He had accomplished the

dreadful and sacred work of redemption with the shedding of His own precious blood. Having born in His body the sin of mankind, there remained one last enemy to conquer, and that was the plague of eternal death and separation from God forever, which awaits every person at the grave.

After the Saviour died, Nicodemus, who had sought out the Lord by night (John 3: 1-18), and Joseph of Arimathaea (John 19: 38-42), besought the body of Jesus, and having wrapped it, placed it in a new sepulchre in the garden. Now, death and burial are regarded as the *final chapter* in the story of man, but that premise was about to be nullified. After three days and three nights, the Lord Jesus arose from the grave:

“For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (Matthew 12: 40)

“Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.” (John 10: 17-18)

“Now upon the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came unto the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared, and certain others with them. And they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre. And they entered in, and found not the body of the Lord Jesus. And it came to pass, as they were much perplexed thereabout, behold, two men stood by them in shining garments: And as they were afraid, and bowed down their faces to the earth,

they said unto them, Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee, Saying, The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.” (Luke 24: 1-7)

The miracle of that resurrection morning was the capstone of God’s plan of salvation. Jesus came into the world, born of a virgin; He lived a perfect, sinless life, therein satisfying every jot and tittle of the law; He went to the cross and suffered death for every man; and finally, He arose victorious from the grave, and the *final chapter* of man was forever rewritten:

“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 15: 55-57)

The *hour of divine agony*, the *hour of divine indignation*, and the *hour of divine triumph*, comprise the “hour” of which Mark wrote. The “bitter cup” of the garden prayer turned as sweet as heaven at the empty tomb! And it is this *hour* that has earned the undying devotion of all the redeemed. Perhaps nothing surpasses the praise of Dr. Isaac Watts, in his beloved hymn, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*:

When I survey the wondrous cross, On which the Prince of glory died, My richest gains I count but loss, And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it Lord! that I should boast, Save in the death of Christ my God, All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to His blood.

See, from His head, His hands, His feet, Sorrow and love flow mingled down, Did e’er such love and sorrow meet, Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were a present far too small, Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all!

This song, which John Newton, as a child sitting on his mother’s lap, heard Dr. Watts sing, was instrumental in his own conversion experience. While clinging to a broken ship mast in a storm off the coast of England, Newton cried out, “God, if you can forgive a wretch like me, please, save me!” This man, formerly a blasphemous slave trader, would go on to write the blessed hymn *Amazing Grace*, undoubtedly the most famous hymn of the New Testament era. The epitaph inscribed upon his tombstone reads:

John Newton, Clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy.

Praise God for the *wondrous cross*, and His *amazing grace*!