

# Gethsemane's Cup

*“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.”*

—**Matthew 26:39**

## **IN THE BIBLE, A CUP IS**

used both in the literal and figurative senses. In the figurative sense it may represent something good or blessed, as in Psalm 23: “My cup runneth over.” More often, a cup represents experiences of a difficult nature, as indicated when Jesus asked two of his disci-

ples, “Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” (Matt. 20:22; Mark 10:38) Here Jesus used the symbols of the cup and of baptism to illustrate his own sacrificial life, which represented the Father’s will for him. The drinking of this cup and the carrying out of this baptism entailed a difficult course, which was brought out by the Master’s added words: “How am I pressed, till it may be consummated.”—Luke 12:50, *Wilson’s Emphatic Diaglott*

From a study of the Old Testament scriptures, Jesus was aware, in advance, of many of the

experiences which would come to him in the drinking of this cup of experience. Without question Jesus recognized that he was the Lamb of God of which John the Baptist had spoken, and from the time features of the Passover picture, he knew both the day and the hour in which he would be slain as the greater lamb. (John 1:29; Exod. 12:2-6) Jesus also quoted from Isaiah 53:12, applying to himself the expression "numbered with the transgressors." (Luke 22:37) Other Old Testament scriptures probably indicated to Jesus that crucifixion was the form that his death would take, to which he alluded.—Num. 21:9; Deut. 21:22,23; John 3:14; 12:32,33

All of these were matters in which Jesus was instructed by the Scriptures, and he willingly followed their leadings. As we read, "Jesus therefore, knowing all things that should come upon him, went forth." He asked, with the obvious answer, "The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" Again his words, "What shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour." (John 18:4,11; 12:27) The Master was fully dedicated to the doing of his Father's will even when it involved hardship, suffering and death. This he made very plain; he was indeed willing to drink the cup which the Father had given him.

## **IN THE GARDEN**

In view of Jesus' acquaintance with many of the details of his death and his complete dedication to the Father's will, some have wondered about a statement made shortly before his betrayal and arrest. Jesus had taken his disciples just outside of

Jerusalem to a place called the Garden of Gethsemane, situated on the side of the Mount of Olives. After instructing his closest companions—Peter, James, and John—to watch and pray, Jesus drew apart for private reflection and communion with the Father.—Matt. 26:36-39; Luke 22:39-42

Moments earlier Jesus had said to his disciples, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death.” (Matt. 26:38) Now he fell upon his face and began to pray in great earnest. His request was brief, but three times with equal intensity, Jesus uttered his prayer. To this day some find his words difficult to understand: “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.”—vs. 39

What was this particular cup which Jesus desired be removed from him, if it was God’s will? Whatever it represented, it certainly was a matter that weighed most heavily upon our Lord. The intensity of the mental stress which he experienced in Gethsemane is attested to by the Gospel writers. Both Matthew and Mark write that Jesus was very distressed and grieved, even to the point where he said that he felt as if his soul was being crushed.—Matt. 26:37,38; Mark 14:33,34

The very word “Gethsemane” seems to reflect the bitter trial which our Lord encountered there. The name signifies “an oil press,” undoubtedly because olives from the surrounding grove were there pressed to extract the valuable oil. This, then, became the very site of our Master’s great distress, the place where he was put to the test and his soul pressed with such severity as he had never before experienced.

## **A FLAWED INTERPRETATION**

The first thought that might enter the mind regarding the meaning of the cup in Matthew 26:39 is that it referred to Jesus' impending death. Jesus, after all, was a human being. Might not his words have been merely an expression of his humanity, and the natural and instinctive desire to avoid death if at all possible? Perhaps there was another way by which the Heavenly Father could accomplish his plan of salvation for the human race without requiring the sacrifice of his own dear Son.

This idea, however, we reject as being wholly out of harmony with the Scriptures. As already noted, Jesus was fully aware of the Father's plans and purposes. While in his pre-human existence, he had agreed to come to the earth and be transformed from a spirit being to human flesh, for the very purpose of laying down his life as a ransom sacrifice for Adam. It had long been determined that the death of the Redeemer would be an absolute necessity for carrying forward this phase of the Father's plan. He was the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." (Rev. 13:8) Jesus himself specifically predicted that his death was imminent and acknowledged that he had been selected for the very purpose of laying down his life as the ransom price for sinful man, represented in Adam.—Matt. 20:28

Since Jesus had already expressed his willingness to offer himself as a ransom sacrifice, it would be inconsistent with his own character and the resoluteness of purpose demonstrated throughout his ministry now to pray that his death experience be removed. Having predicted his own death to the disciples on several occasions, would he now be

requesting that this should not occur? After asking the two disciples if they were able to drink “the cup that I shall drink of,” was he now asking that he himself should not be required to drink it? Neither of these alternatives is in any sense reasonable. Thus, we conclude that the cup Jesus prayed might be removed could not have been that of his death.

## **A SUGGESTED MEANING**

Jesus knew according to the Scriptures that he must die, and that this death would be brought about by crucifixion. In order for him to be thus condemned by any tribunal, his enemies would have to misrepresent his character and his teachings. Somehow they would have to make it appear that he was the vilest of criminals and a blasphemer of the true God. Crucifixion was considered such a horrible and humiliating form of death that it was reserved for the very lowest class of criminals. The pains of death were protracted for an especially long period by this method, sometimes lasting for days. Death was finally brought on by the utter exhaustion, hunger and thirst of the victim and sometimes was accelerated by the breaking of his legs.

For Jesus, such a death by crucifixion would carry with it, in the minds of many, a double significance. First, it would imply that he was a criminal in the sight of his fellow men—those whom he loved so dearly, to whom he had ministered so unselfishly, and for whom he was actually laying down his life. Secondly, it would also carry with it the thought that he was accursed of God, being punished as a blasphemer, and one who had dishonored the name of Jehovah. What a fate for one who had come to

earth for the very purpose of demonstrating God's love, of glorifying his name, and of providing redemption and salvation for the human race! It can be no wonder that in those hours at Gethsemane, Jesus was overcome with mental distress and anguish as he contemplated the events that lay just ahead.

Did this indicate weakness on Jesus' part, or a lack of courage? Certainly not. Looking back upon his ministry, we see how thoroughly Jesus was dedicated to the accomplishment of the Father's purpose and the tremendous determination and strength of will that marked his efforts. Time and again he had shown no fear of the authorities as he taught the people, and on some occasions had found it necessary to speak out openly against them. However we interpret Jesus' request to have the cup removed, surely it could not contain any element of weakness or lack of courage.

Our Lord's character was that of one possessed of perfect virtue and of a boundless capacity for love and justice. These would combine to make him keenly aware of the shame that death by crucifixion would heap upon him and of the unjust nature of the accusations. Above all else, however, was the thought that he was to be slain as a blasphemer and opponent of God, his Heavenly Father, whom he loved so supremely and whose character he had revealed.

It was this shame and ignominy which attached to death by crucifixion, and the wholly unjust suggestion that he was a blasphemer of God, that we consider the primary aspect of Gethsemane's cup, which seemed almost too much for Jesus to

bear. We suggest that in his petition to the Father, Jesus was merely requesting that, if it were possible, his impending death be brought about in some other way than to imply that he who had been so faithful in leading men to God was now an opponent, an enemy of the Almighty Creator. Let us not fail to take note, however, that in his request, as fervently as the desire was expressed by the Master, it was accompanied by the qualifying words, "Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done."—Luke 22:42

Why, we may ask, did the Heavenly Father require that his dear Son pass through such an experience? The answer is provided in Hebrews 5:8, where we read: "Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered." Even our Lord Jesus, who was perfect after the flesh, was in need of developing absolute obedience to the Father. This could come only through suffering, trial and testing. The Apostle Paul later related obedience to the sacrificial path of the cross when he wrote: "Being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."—Phil. 2:8

What an extreme test this was of the loyalty of heart possessed by Jesus, and yet how necessary it was in the divine purpose. Let us remember that such tests of absolute obedience to God's will were required not only of Jesus, but of his footstep followers as well. Both are heirs of God and destined for positions of great trust and responsibility in regenerating the human race to perfection. Both will be endued with the divine nature which, unlike that possessed by even angels, is not subject to death

and represents inherent life of the very highest order. Only those who have proven themselves thoroughly loyal to the Father, even under the most adverse circumstances, will be elevated to such a position of honor and trust.

## **STRENGTH FROM ON HIGH**

Returning now to the garden scene, we find Jesus continuing to meditate upon the matter and to beseech divine guidance. Hence we note it was no less than three times that Jesus lifted his heart in prayer, earnestly seeking to know the full extent of the Father's will for him. A careful reading of the words which the Master uttered reveals a progressive tone. In the first prayer the sequence of phrases indicates an initial mention of his own preference: "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." (Matt. 26:39) Notice, though, how this request was modified in his last two prayers and how full submission to the Father's will became dominant: "O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done." (vss. 42,44) Ending his meditation, Jesus was fully resolved to accept the Father's will, to which he then obediently submitted.

His period of intimate communion with the Father then over, Jesus gave every evidence that he had received the answer and the strength which he sought. With resoluteness he awakened the disciples and prepared them for his arrest and betrayal just at hand. Already they could hear the commotion of the approaching band of officers and men, Judas at their head. Yet throughout the difficult hours of the



night and the day which followed, Jesus exhibited no fear or concern. Even under the most trying circumstances, he remained calm and at ease. His concern was no longer for himself but centered now upon those around him and upon their welfare. How dramatically we see the power of prayer thus illustrated for us in the crucial hours of our Lord's experience.

The Apostle Paul tells us that Jesus, "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Heb. 12:2) This suggests to our mind that as a result of his moments of prayer and communion with the Father, Jesus was able to disregard the impending shame which was to be heaped upon him, knowing that it was God's will for him. Further, since the shame would be brought on charges which were wholly without foundation, he would refuse to let the experience bear him down. The strength to do this came in large measure, we believe, from his earnest prayer and his complete acquiescence to the will of God. Thus, shortly later as he was being arrested, he said, "The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?"—John 18:11

As Hebrews 12:2 suggests, Jesus must also have been reminded of the great joy and privilege which awaited him in the future—that of being God's instrument in restoring the lost world of mankind to perfection and harmony with him. This, too, must have given him great assurance, even while under such severe circumstances. As Isaiah prophesied concerning Jesus, "He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied."—Isa. 53:11

## **AN ADDITIONAL MEANING**

We believe that there was another aspect to this cup, one which the Heavenly Father in his goodness saw fit to take away. Throughout the course of his earthly ministry Jesus enjoyed a most intimate relationship with the Father. To the very end Jesus appeared confident that he had carried out God's will fully and completely. Just prior to entering the garden he had prayed: "I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do." "I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me." "I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me." (John 17:4,6,8) There was not so much as the slightest hint or suggestion here that Jesus had come short in any respect thus far in his mission.

However, as we again enter the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane, we notice that Jesus' confidence seems now to be severely tested. In contemplation of all that went before in his ministry, was he now somewhat uncertain of his faithfulness? Without question, Satan, the master tempter, was desirous of presenting just such a suggestion to the mind of our Lord. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry Satan had arisen to tempt him in the wilderness and then had "departed from him for a season." (Luke 4:13) Now it appears he had returned at the final hour. This time his message was not to say, "If thou be the Son of God," but seemingly to suggest doubt as to the success of his mission.

This thought seems to be implied from Hebrews 12:3,4, where we are asked to consider Jesus and what he endured. We are then reminded that we have not yet "resisted unto blood, striving against

sin.” Satan is the author of sin. In the case of Jesus, because he was perfect, his “striving” against sin was not directed toward any fallen tendencies on his part, but was fully toward the Adversary himself. This struggle had gone on continually to some extent throughout Jesus’ ministry, but it appears quite possible that now, so close to the time of his greatest suffering and trial, Satan purposely interjected a sinister temptation. What better time and place to do this, the Adversary perhaps reasoned, than in the Garden of Gethsemane, just prior to Jesus’ arrest?

What might some of the thoughts have been which Satan desired to instill into the mind of our Lord? His ministry was now nearing its close. He had done a good work, certainly, but had he actually fulfilled every feature of the law and carried out all that which had been written beforehand by the prophets? Had he been perfect in every thought, word and deed? Had he pleased the Heavenly Father completely as his representative and spokesman? Would he on the morrow be able to continue unflinchingly to perform his role, even in the face of the added shame and ignominy, to the very end?

Might he not have failed, perhaps in some slight particular, and thus be accounted unworthy in the Father’s sight? Would he not then lose everything that he hoped for, including the joy of restoring the lost race, and even his own future life? With all the arts and cunning that the Adversary was able to command, he attempted to place all these weights, questions and doubts upon our Lord. No wonder Jesus’ heart was so burdened that he said, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful.”—Matt. 26:38

Let us now consider the answer to this prayer, as it came to Jesus. In Luke's gospel, but no other, there is mention made of an angel who strengthened him in the Garden of Gethsemane. (Luke 22:43) This verse is of doubtful authenticity, not being found in any manuscripts prior to the sixth century. Thus, we will not consider it specifically in this regard. Paul, however, speaks of Jesus' experience, stating, "In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety." (Heb. 5:7, *New American Standard Bible*) The Greek word translated "heard" in this text is stated by *Thayer's Greek Definitions* to have the thought of a request being granted—that is, of being heard favorably.

We believe that Jesus was heard favorably and answered with regard to the temptation of Satan. In some way, perhaps through the influence of the Holy Spirit, Jesus derived the strength, the assurance, and the comfort he needed to become wholly victorious. Through his communion with the Father he was able to reaffirm the assurance that he had been entirely faithful. Satan had once again utterly failed in his attempt to thwart the Master's obedience, faith and trust. Jesus was faithful to the very end. Hallelujah! What a Savior!

## **THE LESSON FOR US**

We believe that in the providences of God, "Gethsemane" experiences are permitted to come upon us all. The Adversary is our main foe. At times he succeeds in breaking through our defenses, to plant seeds of discouragement within us. In one way or

another, he would like to make us think that the trials and besetments of the Christian way will be too much for us, that we will not be able to bear up under the difficulties, and that we might just as well cease our efforts.

For one who has sacrificed all his earthly hopes in favor of the heavenly, this trial could be most severe indeed. If the Adversary can succeed in any measure in preventing the Lord's people from beholding the Father's face and appreciating the greatness of their own calling and their own present position in it, how helpless it could leave them.

What is the course that should be followed at such a time of special testing? It should be the one that was demonstrated by our Lord—to draw apart from everything for a time, to seek the sweet communion with the Father in quiet prayer and meditation. Let us unburden our hearts to him, mention the difficulties of the way which seem too great for us, and look to him for guidance and help.

Let us, too, be reminded of God's precious promises to us and of the many assurances he has provided in his Word. Let us be confident that if we are seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, these promises will find their fulfillment in our lives. (Matt. 6:33) Let us draw upon the tremendous resources of God which are available to us through communion and prayer. We should call to mind the admonition found in Paul's words: "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, ... Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised)."—Heb. 10:22,23

In contemplating the lessons of the Garden of Gethsemane, may we realize that now, as never

before, we are in need of following our Lord's example. In addition to being on guard against all the wiles of the Adversary, let us also be wary of the allurements of the world and all unreasonable and unscriptural demands of the flesh. Above all else, let us remember our blessed privilege of prayer, of seeking the face of our Father, and of receiving from him the encouragement and help we need. Only by this means can we be fully shielded from those temptations which would otherwise be too great for us.

There is a wonderful experience awaiting all those who will conscientiously do as Jesus did. That experience will be to enjoy the peace which pervaded the final hours of his earthly life, the same peace he so lovingly enjoined upon us: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." (John 14:27) What a rich portion of divine blessing can thus be ours! ■

