Matthew 26:36–42 contains some of the most sacred and solemn words in the Bible. It is there that we see Him who is our advocate with the Father facing the infinite cost of becoming “the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 2:1–2).

This act of propitiation began in the Garden of Gethsemane. In a sense, there are only two gardens that matter in the Bible—the Garden of Eden and the Garden of Gethsemane. Both were arenas in which the destiny of man was fought out—arenas where God and sin met. In the first garden, the first Adam faced all the snares of sin, the Evil One, darkness and hell, and fell defeated in the face of it all. There, man was ruined and broken, and his life was blighted. That ruin is evident in ten thousand sicknesses of the human soul, even in the present day. But the glorious good news is that in the second garden, “the second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came.”

Out of man’s ruin, Christ brought man’s redemption.

Leading up to this sacred experience in Gethsemane, in the days immediately preceding His offering of Himself on the cross, our Lord led His disciples through a number of profoundly significant experiences. These experiences had one end in view, namely, to bring them into a deeper and fuller understanding of what it would mean to Him, the Holy One, to bear away our sins.

The first of these experiences was in the upper room, where He laid aside His garments and took a towel—the mark of His being the lowest in the company—and began to wash the disciples’ feet. The disciples learned from this act that He had come into the world not to be ministered to but to minister; that He who had created the world and all that was in it—even the very ones who sat before Him—had come specifically to humble Himself. The second of these experiences was in the upper room in Jerusalem, where Jesus met with them at the table. In that room, He broke the bread to show them the coming rending of His body, and poured out the wine to show them how His blood was to be poured out for us and for our salvation.

It is clear from the accounts in the Gospels that these first two experiences were essentially for the disciples. These experiences were intended to deepen their understanding of what the cross was to mean for Jesus. However, the sad experience of Matthew 26:36–42 was essentially for Him. The supper was a preview of the cross for the disciples, where they saw the Lord’s death enacted before their eyes—even as we do at every occasion when we gather at the Lord’s Table. But Gethsemane was essentially a foretaste of the cross for Christ.

There was a cup in the upper room in Jerusalem that Paul delighted to call “the cup of blessing which we bless” (1 Cor. 10:16). This is the cup the psalmist alluded to when he wrote, “What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits toward me? I will take the cup of salvation” (Ps. 116:13). Jesus was offering them this cup when He said, “Take, drink from it” (Matt. 26:27).

But there is another cup in these verses—a cup in Gethsemane that Jesus calls “this cup.” He said, “Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done” (Matt. 26:42).

---

1 From the hymn “Praise to the Holiest in the Height,” by John H. Newman, 1865.
the cup in the upper room was the cup of blessing—the cup of salvation that they were to drink—then the cup Jesus looked upon there in the garden, which would make the other cup possible, was the cup of bitterness and sorrow that He must drink.

Only when we come to understand something of the bitterness of the cup He drank do we discover the depths of the cup of salvation from which we need to drink day by day. The experience of our Lord in Gethsemane was a foretaste of the cross, for the appalling spectacle of the sin of man was set before Him in this cup. The contents of this cup were the ingredients of His suffering and agony on the cross.

The Cup of Bitterness

What was the precise nature of the cup He drank? It was, first and foremost, a cup of sorrow. In verses 37 and 38, the picture of Jesus in the Garden is strikingly different from the picture of Christ in the upper room. The first picture of Jesus, in the upper room, is of One who was composed and calm. But the picture of the Christ of Gethsemane, in this chapter and elsewhere in the Gospels, is a picture of brokenness of heart as the awful spectacle of the sin of man was paraded before the eyes of the holy Savior.

There was a growing brokenness and burden in Jesus’ demeanor. Matthew and Mark record, “He began to be to be very heavy,” then they note that Jesus said, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful.” Mark goes on to refine the picture: “He began to be sore amazed”; as the Revised Standard Version reads, “He began to be greatly disturbed and troubled.” James Moffett takes it further, translating it, “He began to be appalled and agitated.” Luke goes on with the picture, explaining that Jesus was “in agony.” This is what was foreseen in Psalm 69, that which we hear so often in the Messiah, but which so seldom strikes home to our hearts.

It is in this sense, when we draw near to the fountain opened for sin, that we discover Him to be the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. “Behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto his sorrow” (Lam. 1:12). Have you begun to know something of the reflection of the brokenness of Jesus in your own heart? If you have begun to know the godly sorrow that produces repentance, then the message of the throne of God is this: “A broken and contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise” (Ps. 51:17). Jesus’ cup was a cup of sorrow.

It was also a cup of loneliness. Verse 36 demonstrates that this is true, even physically: “Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, ‘Sit here while I go and pray over there.’” Mark tells us that the physical distance was a stone’s throw—about 20 yards. But as He moved out into the no-man’s land of human sin and shame, and the agony of bearing the burden of it, the spiritual distance was infinite.

Isaiah foresaw this when he prophesied that Jesus would be “cut off from the land of the living” (Isa. 53:8). He was cut off in a two-fold sense. First, He was cut off from men by physical distance. This was a progressive attribute of the life of Jesus. He had the multitudes at the beginning. Out of the multitudes, he had the seventy, to whom He committed special tasks as He sent them out to by two. Within the group of seventy there was twelve, and then there were three who went with Him into peculiarly important and sacred places. But in the supreme hour, when He faced the deepest of agonies, He was alone, separated from man by His holiness. But He was not only separate. He was
cut off by the sins that He was bearing—not His own, but ours. “He looked, and there was no man, neither any to regard him.” It was a cup of loneliness.

But the deepest truth about the cup that Jesus drank is that it was a cup of judgment. This, not the physical agony, was the deepest agony of the cross that was projected into the soul of Jesus in Gethsemane. When He cried, “Father,” there is no doubt that He shrank away from the cup. What exactly was He shrinking from? Certainly not mere physical suffering, for the manliness and sheer masculinity of Jesus stand out in the New Testament. It was something far deeper than this from which His holy soul shrank. “Father, if it is possible let this cup pass from Me” (Matt. 26:39). Jesus knew that the essence of the cup was the judgment of a holy God against Him.

The cup that He would drink was full of the wrath of God. As the apostle says, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness and ungodliness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18). Although the wrath of God is not a popular doctrine in the present day, it is no less true because of its unpopularity. The cross of Christ is the place where men start to discover the stark facts about the wrath of God. The vials of God’s wrath were poured into the cup that Christ saw being brought to His lips in Gethsemane.

This is what made the preview of the cross so appalling. The cry that came from the cross in that supreme hour explains the horror of the judgment. When the Father, looking down on all the foul mass of sin cast on the holy soul of His Son, turned Himself away from it all, a cry came from Jesus: “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” (“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Matt. 27:46). Isaiah picks up on this when he says, “The chastisement for our peace was upon Him” (Isa. 53:5). Chastisement, of course, is a family word. Only a father can chastise; a stranger may punish, but it is a family action to chastise. Isaiah sees the deepest truth about it all, in that “the chastisement for our peace was upon Him.” It was a cup of judgment.

Finally, it was a cup of willingness. In the midst of His greatest agonies, these words came from Jesus: “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless not as I will, but as You will” (v. 39). In verse 42 we read, “If this cup may not pass away from Me, except I drink it, Your will be done.” He became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. One of the most mysterious and altogether wondrous things that the New Testament tells us of the cross of Jesus is that He came to it with the words on His lips: “I delight to do Your will” (Ps. 40; Heb. 8) When we come to understand the willingness of the Savior, it boggles the imagination and causes us to bow in wonder and say:

And can it be that I should gain,  
An interest in the Savior’s blood?  
Died He for me who caused His pain?  
For me who Him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! How can it be?  
That Thou my God should’st die for me?  

It was a cup of willingness. It was His cup—and He drank it.

---

2 From the hymn “And Can It Be That I Should Gain,” by Charles Wesley, 1738.
The Cup of Blessing

Now consider the cup that we drink. His was a cup of bitterness and sorrow; ours is a cup of blessing, a cup of salvation. This is the message of the grace of God, that because of all that came to pass on Calvary—because of Jesus’ obedience unto death—there is an answer to my disobedience, and a cup of salvation, from the depths of which we are called by God to drink, and drink, and drink again.

Because He drank a cup of sorrow, the cup that we drink is a cup of joy and peace. The very soul of Jesus was appalled and agitated, broken upon the storms of dispeace. From all that came the good news for men and women like ourselves, spoken in the context of the upper room: “Peace I leave with you” (John 14:27). Jesus urges us to take this cup of salvation, for in it there is peace. “He has made peace,” says the apostle, “through the blood of the cross” (Col. 1:20). We are able to cry with Pilgrim, in John Bunyan’s great and gracious classic, “I gave three leaps for joy when the fact dawned upon me.” It is a cup of joy instead of His cup of sorrow. It is a cup of peace instead of His cup of disturbed amazement.

Second, you will notice that because He drank a cup of loneliness, we may drink a cup of fellowship. We were banished from God by our sin; in the days of our Christian lives, we have experienced our fellowship being blighted and broken; and some of us have known our lives drifting away from God. But the message of Gethsemane to us is that at the foot of the cross of Jesus we may discover again our fellowship restored, and we may drink the cup of a restored fellowship.

Third, because He drank a cup of judgment, we may drink a cup of pardon. That is sung in Scotland during the times of communion: “Here,” we say, pointing to the cup of salvation from the wells from which we drink spiritually as well as physically, “is pardon’s pledge and token.” That is what Jesus gives to all who come gladly and humbly to drink of the cup of salvation. That is where we find the answer to every accusing voice: because He drank, to the last dregs, the cup of the wrath of God, I may come to the cross of Jesus. Having come once, I may keep coming. I may take the accuser of the brethren who comes to accuse me day and night, and I may bring him to that place and say, “This is the ground on which I am resting.” I may my fierce accuser face, and tell him . . . what? Tell him I’m not so bad as he says? Tell him that he’s got the wrong man; that I’m not the kind of dark blackened sinner that he tells me I am? Oh, no; I’ll tell him, “You haven’t discovered the half of it yet, but come with me to this place where the judgment of God has been poured out upon sin, which I have claimed, and to the ground on which I stand.” There, “I may my fierce accuser face, and tell him You have died.” Then I can go on living throughout the whole of my Christian life on this ground alone. It is on this ground that the apostle Paul was able to turn to every enemy and every accuser, and throw out his challenges to them all: “Who can be against us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Who is he that condemns? God is for us, it is Christ who has died” (see Rom. 8:31–37). The ground on which he stood was the finished work of Christ.

---

3 From the hymn “Approach, My Soul, the Mercy Seat,” by John Newton, 1779.
To that we must come. In the words that we sing: “Come, let us to the Lord our God with contrite hearts return. . . .”

The kind of return God wants is the kind motivated by godly sorrow, which works repentance not to be repented of, so that from this day our stand may be there, and we may face every accuser and tell them Christ has died. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for such a Savior and for such a Gospel.

---

4 From the hymn “Come, Let Us to the Lord Our God,” by John Morison, 1781.