

1           “... The whole account [of Gethsemane] resonates intense torment and anguish. This appears, for  
2 example, in the fact that he took Peter, James and John with him, not merely for companionship but so that  
3 they might watch and pray with him. It was of paramount importance for himself, for the universe and for  
4 mankind that he should not fail in his task, and the temptations that beset him on the eve of his agony  
5 represented a real threat to the completion of his obedience. Hell would do - was doing - all in its power to  
6 divert him from the Father's will. Hence the supreme urgency of watching and praying; and hence the need  
7 for the prayers of others. Could there be a more impressive witness to the felt weakness of Jesus than his  
8 turning to those frail human beings and saying to them, 'I need your prayers!'?

9           ...It is impressive, too, that immediately after telling his disciples that his soul was filled with mortal  
10 fear he turned away from them and set his face towards God: 'He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond  
11 them, knelt down and prayed' (Lk. 22:41). There was nowhere else to go. Even the physical circumstances of  
12 his prayer make plain that it came out of a soul near the end of its resources. He throws himself prostrate on  
13 the ground. He is so exhausted by the first phase of his prayer that 'an angel from heaven appeared to him  
14 and strengthened him' (Lk. 22:43). And when he resumes his prayer, it is in anguish (*en agonia*), praying so  
15 earnestly that his sweat falls like drops of blood to the ground (Lk. 22:44). This is in line with the allusion to  
16 Gethsemane in Hebrews 5:7, where the writer tells us that Jesus offered up supplications and entreaties to  
17 God 'with loud cries and tears'. Here is a man pouring his whole strength, physical and spiritual, into a plea  
18 that God would 'save' him.

19           It is clear from all the accounts that Jesus' experience of turmoil and anguish was both real and  
20 profound. His sorrow was as great as a man could bear, his fear convulsive, his astonishment almost  
21 paralyzing. He came within a hairsbreadth of break-down. He faced the will of God as raw holiness in its most  
22 acute form: and it terrified him. Long ago, at his baptism, he had publicly embraced the Messianic role,  
23 identifying himself totally with his people. In the temptations in the desert he had already faced some of the  
24 implications of his position, as the Enemy quickly unleashed three massive assaults. But the full implications  
25 of being the Servant and the Ransom (Mk. 10:45) dawned on him only gradually, as he reflected on the  
26 Scriptures, observed sin at work and communed with his Father. In Gethsemane the whole, terrible truth  
27 strikes home. The hour of reckoning has come. Now is the last moment to escape. Beyond it there can be no  
28 turning back.

29           When Moses saw the glory of God on Mount Sinai so terrifying was the sight that he trembled with  
30 fear (Heb. 12:21). But that was God in covenant: God in grace. What Christ saw in Gethsemane was God with  
31 the sword raised (Zc. 13:7; Mt. 26:31). The sight was unbearable. In a few short hours, he, the Last Adam,  
32 would stand before that God answering for the sin of the world: indeed, identified with the sin of the world  
33 (2 Cor. 5:21). He became, as Luther said, 'the greatest sinner that ever was' (*cf.* Gal. 3:13). Consequently, to  
34 quote Luther again, 'No one ever feared death so much as this man.' He feared it because for him it was no  
35 sleep (1 Thes. 4: 13), but the wages of sin: death with the sting; death unmodified and unmitigated; death as  
36 involving all that sin deserved. He, alone, would face it without a ... 'covering', providing by his very dying the  
37 only covering for the world, but doing so as a holocaust, totally exposed to God's abhorrence of sin. And he  
38 would face death without God, deprived of the one solace and the one resource which had always been  
39 there.

40           The wonder of the love of Christ for his people is not that for their sake he faced death without fear,  
41 but that for their sake he faced it, terrified. Terrified by what he knew, and terrified by what he did not know,  
42 he took damnation lovingly.

43           Yet, remarkably, there is an emotional depth beyond Gethsemane: that of Golgotha itself – the  
44 crucifixion. This is reflected particularly in the cry of dereliction, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken  
45 me?' (Mt. 27:46). The state of mind indicated in these words is not coterminous with the crucifixion itself.  
46 The humiliation of Christ was not a point, but a line, beginning at Bethlehem and descending towards  
47 Calvary. But Calvary itself, in turn, is a line, as, on the cross, the Lord moves deeper and deeper into the  
48 abyss. The [crucifixion] itself took place at 9 am (Mk. 15 :25). Between 9am and noon, there took place the  
49 conversation with the penitent robber (Lk. 23:40ff.), in the course of which it becomes plain that Jesus is still

50 sustained by hope ('Today you will be with me in paradise'). From noon to 3pm there was darkness over the  
51 land (Mk. 15:33). Shortly afterwards Jesus cried, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani?" and breathed his last.  
52 According to Luke's account, he did so in full possession of his consciousness as a child: 'Father, into your  
53 hands I commit my spirit' (Lk. 23 :46).

54 The reason for laboring these details is that they underline the fact that Jesus was not forsaken all  
55 the time he was on the cross. The forsaking by God was only a moment in the long journey from the  
56 crucifixion to death. Yet it was the climactic moment, and a moment of incredible density; and it was so  
57 precisely because its agony was so compacted - so infinite - as to be well-nigh unsustainable. As an  
58 eighteenth-century Gaelic hymn expressed it, the whole weight of sin (pains and agonies it would have taken  
59 the world eternity to endure) were all poured on him in one horrific moment.<sup>53</sup>

60 What the emotional content of this forsakenness actually was, it is impossible for us to know. What  
61 is certain is that Golgotha was more awful than Jesus had envisioned in Gethsemane. He felt forsaken, and he  
62 was forsaken. This involved, among other things, Jesus experiencing the agony of unanswered prayer. In  
63 Psalm 22, this idea is expressed just beside the words quoted by Jesus on the cross:

64

65 *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? ...*

66 *O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. (Ps. 22:1-2, RSV)*

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68 What he prayed for is hidden from us. It may have been, once again, that the cup might pass; or, that there  
69 be some light; or, that he be given some token of the Father's love; or, that the pain might be over soon. We  
70 do not know. Whatever it was, there was no answer: only the echo of his own voice, the derision of those he  
71 had come to save, and the cruel taunts of hell.

72 Beside the unanswered prayer there was the loss of the consciousness of being God's son. In the  
73 moment of abandonment, there is no sense of his own sonship. Even in Gethsemane, Jesus had been able to  
74 say, 'Abba!' But now the cry is, 'Eloi, Eloi' ("my God, my God"). He is aware only of the god-ness and power  
75 and holiness and otherness of God. In his self-image, he is no longer Son, but Sin; no longer... "the Beloved"  
76 with whom God is well-pleased, but... "the cursed one": vile, foul and repulsive.

77 Corresponding to the loss of the sense of sonship there was a real abandonment by God. No-one was  
78 ever less prepared for such an experience than Jesus. As the eternal Word he had always been with God (Jn  
79 1:1). As the incarnate Son the Father had always been with him (Jn. 16:32). They had gone up from  
80 Bethlehem to Calvary, like Abraham and Isaac, 'together' (Gn: 22:6, 8). But now, in the hour of his greatest  
81 need, God is not there. When he most needs encouragement, there is no voice to cry, 'This is my beloved  
82 Son.' When he most needs reassurance, there is no-one to say, 'I am well pleased.' No grace was extended to  
83 him, no favor shown, no comfort administered, no concession made. God was present only as displeased,  
84 expressing that displeasure with overwhelming force in all the circumstances of Calvary. Every detail in a  
85 drama which walked a fine line between chaos and liturgy declared, 'This is what God thinks of you and of the  
86 sin you bear!' He was cursed (Gal. 3:13), because he became 'the greatest thief, murderer, adulterer, robber,  
87 desecrator, blasphemer, etc., there has ever been anywhere in the world'.

88 ... He is damned and banished with the effect, as Calvin describes it, that 'he must also grapple hand  
89 to hand with the armies of hell and the dread of everlasting death ... suffering in his soul the terrible  
90 torments of a condemned and forsaken man'.<sup>58</sup> He was the scapegoat. He was 'outside', in the outer  
91 darkness...

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<sup>53</sup> From the hymn, *Fulangas Chriosd* ('The Suffering of Christ') in Donald McLean (ed.), *The Spiritual Songs of Dugald Buchanan* (1913), p.8  
<sup>58</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xvi.10.