

He did not want to be alone as he wrestled in prayer that night. We often forget that Jesus was truly human. He needed the comfort of companionship: He wanted the encouragement that comes from loved ones. So Jesus leaves the larger group of his disciples behind, and takes with him his three closest friends: Peter, James, and John. He can no longer keep back the burden that is weighing him down. “My soul,” he says, “is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with Me” (Matthew 26:38). He stumbled a few steps further and fell to the ground.

Before him that night was the cup. Jesus talked about his mission terms of a cup; it was a poetic way to describe the chain of events that would lead to his own crucifixion. In order to really understand the metaphor of the cup, you must go back to the Old Testament. In Psalm 75, David sang: “For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed, and he pours out from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs.” Isaiah foretold of a time to come when the cup would pass from the people: “thus says your Lord, the Lord your God who pleads the cause of his people: ‘Behold, I have taken from your hand the cup of staggering; the bowl of My wrath you shall drink no more.’ ” (51:22). The cup that was set before our Lord for him to drink was the cup that held the wrath of God—the wrath of God against sin; the wrath of God against all your rebellion, all your lack of love, all your passing of judgment upon others, all your selfish acts, all your indulging the flesh, all your spiritual apathy, and all of mine.

That cup was set before Jesus and he saw it, and he knew exactly where it would lead. That is why he felt crushed. Do you understand? Maybe, in this case, it is impossible to understand. None of us is nearly as frightened of hell as we should be. None of us has the first clue about the real terror of its eternal loneliness. None of us can begin to fathom its unsatisfied hunger and thirst. But Jesus knows, and because he knows, he looks into that eternal poison in the cup, and he trembles.

He trembles, and he begs the Father that, if possible, some other way may be found, some different approach, something other than what is in this cup before him. He looks over the brim of the cup into its depths, and he shakes in terror.

You and I sin like it's no big deal. "God will forgive," we say. "He is loving and merciful and kind. No worries." Well, go to Gethsemane tonight with Jesus, and see with your own eyes whether or not it is a "big deal." Look at him as he shakes before the very portion that we foolishly choose for ourselves time and again. And see him, as he lifts his eyes from the cup to his Father and pleads for some other way.

But then see our Savior display that radical difference between himself and all the other sons of Adam and daughters of Eve. See him lower his eyes to the cup again and say, "Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours be done." It has exhausted him, terrorized him, looking into that cup, so he turns back to his friends, for the comfort they can give. But here another wound strikes him.

As he has struggled with the terrors of death and hell for them, they have fallen asleep. "Peter!" he cries, startling them awake. "could you not watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:40–41).

That is what our flesh is. Weak, and so we wound our Lord with our apathy. We wound him with our "no big deal" sinning. We add to the terrors of the cup he must drink. But surely Jesus' word of warning will keep his disciples awake and in prayer? The most terrifying events of their discipleship are only moments away now. Surely, they will realize and pray?

But no. Jesus turns back and makes the same struggle in prayer, and returns for comfort from his friends and again encounters only apathy—they are sound asleep. He is all alone with this. He turns back for his final prayer. The sweat falls from him in great drops like blood under the pressure of his "yes" to the Father's will. He will do it. He will go forward to drink this cup. He will swallow the poison of humanity's apathy.

Look into the face of your Lord as he rises from that final prayer. What do you see now? You see peace. The peace came from his prayer. The

peace came from his trust in the Father. To submit to the One who has loved you forever is, in the end, not terror, but joy—no matter how dark the path. In that peace, Jesus turned back to his disciples for the last time. Their weakness can wound him no more; he is going forth to swallow it down with all their sins and the sins of the whole world. So while they slept, he won the battle, and he won it alone. He will now go out to meet his betrayer. He wakes up his disciples from their sleep to meet the terrors to come. And seeing him march forth to meet this end with such peace; such resolve, we sing in astonished awe:

What thou, my Lord, hast suffered was all for sinner's gain.
Mine, mine was the transgression, But thine the deadly pain.
Lo, here I fall, my savior! 'tis I deserve thy place.
Look on me with thy favor, and grant to me thy grace. (LSB 450:3)

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, by the struggle of your will to drink the cup of wrath and empty it for us forever, you have shown us that you will never be apathetic about us. You drained that cup for us. You can be counted on to save us to the uttermost. To you be glory with your Father and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.