



Digging Deeper

3/15/26

What the Passover Teaches about Jesus' Death

By Dr. John B. MacDonald

"I'm not sure I should have heard that." That might be an understandable response to hearing Jesus pray in Gethsemane. It's the same feeling I had when my brother was in crisis midway through college. My strong, smart older brother agonized over the direction of his life. He was in his room with my mother when I heard him cry. Not sniffles, but yelps. Piercing, involuntary, plaintive cries. This rocked my world. It felt urgent and important, and also embarrassing. Should I know about this? Should I be listening? His struggle was so intensely personal that I felt ashamed for overhearing. Yet I longed to know what was happening and what it all meant. Similar reticence and attraction run through me as I open my heart to listen to the accounts of Jesus's agony in the garden.

In Gethsemane, Jesus engaged spiritually the forsakeness on the cross before he was actually arrested and crucified. "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death" (Matthew 26:38). Jesus knew he would lose his bodily life on the cross. But first, he would lose what was more precious: the sense of his Father's good pleasure. Prior to his capture, Jesus envisioned what was to come as a cup he would have to drink (Matthew 26:39, 42). The goblet was filled with the wrath of God against sin in all its destructive and distorting power (Isaiah 51:17). As Jesus pressed forward into the events of his passion, he would perceive his Father as moving backward, away from him. In his prayers in Gethsemane, he engaged the final temptation to turn from that horror and let the world perish instead of himself.

Jesus knew he had to choose willingly to become a curse, to become sin, for us. Just later, when the guards come to arrest him, Jesus will say, "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matthew 26:53). No power could force Jesus into forsakenness and death. Only his intentional embrace of the triune will, as planned from eternity, could move forward his redemption through his suffering. The encroaching grief of losing awareness of his Father's cherished presence pressed Jesus to the ground, on his face, in brokenhearted revulsion.

In the sorrowful intensity of this hour, not even Jesus's closest disciples could remain attentive (Matthew 26:40, 43). And perhaps that's as it should be. The witnesses overheard only the essence of his struggle. It might be inappropriate, not to mention overwhelming, for us to see and hear it all. So as we walk through several aspects of Gethsemane, I want to keep this sense of reserve. We tread on holy ground.

Why Gethsemane?

During the Passover supper in the upper room, Jesus offered himself through the bread and the wine. "This is my body. . . . This is my blood" (Matthew 26:26, 28). Following the meal, he and his disciples left the house in Jerusalem and went across the Kidron Valley to a place on the western slope of the Mount of Olives (Luke 22:39), specifically known as Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36). John's Gospel adds some



important information. Gethsemane was a “garden” (John 18:1), a word used for any place with cultivated shrubs and trees. The place still exists. Gethsemane is an orchard of ancient olive trees. The fruit of these trees remains vital for an oil used in cooking, heating, lighting, and even healing.

Intriguingly, John’s Gospel tells us, “Jesus often met there with his disciples” (John 18:2). Jesus was from Nazareth, far to the north. Yet he knew a place in Jerusalem that he loved to frequent. We know Jesus came to Jerusalem for Passover when he was twelve (Luke 2:41). As devout Jews were supposed to gather in the holy city for sacred festivals, that visit was likely not Jesus’s only trip to Jerusalem before his ministry began. I imagine a small-town guy like Jesus loved the clean air and peace of a long-tended orchard. Finding an oasis of space and quiet amid the hustle of city life refreshed Jesus. So in going to Gethsemane to pray, Jesus sought a place where he had known solace before.

The name Gethsemane means “olive press.” In the midst of the orchard was a device used to squeeze the olives until they yielded the precious oil. The base of an olive press is a huge stone basin. An enormous millstone fits in that bowl. A system of ropes and wood poles allows the user to roll the stone around the basin. When the great rock bowl gets filled with olives, the grinding stone is rolled over them, crushing the olives with such weight that the oil seeps out. The meat and skins of the olives get truly pulverized to release every drop.¹

In Israel, high priests were anointed with oil for office (Leviticus 21:10). Kings of Israel would also be anointed as a sign of God’s selection of them to reign (e.g., 1 Samuel 16:13). And the prophet Elijah anointed his successor, Elisha (1 Kings 19:16). In these cases, the oil represented the very Spirit of God. Just so, the word Messiah, which in Greek is Christ, literally means “anointed one.” The long-awaited Messiah would be the saving representative of the Lord who was anointed by the Spirit to be the savior and ruler of God’s people. Indeed, the Spirit descended on Jesus at his baptism, empowering him for messianic ministry (Matthew 3:16–17). Peter described that “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10:38).

So Jesus as Christ would fulfill all three offices of prophet, priest, and king. But now, in Gethsemane, as Jesus drew near to completing our salvation, Jesus the Messiah would himself have to be squeezed. Jesus had to enter the olive press, where the weight of the world was upon him. His own soul was crushed by the burden of our sin. Jesus would have to make a deliberate choice to move into the darkness, despair, and death of bearing the sin of the world upon himself. Remaining faithful to his mission, Jesus in Gethsemane accepted being pressed down unto death on the cross. His blood would be squeezed from him in order to redeem us.

Crushing of Heart and Will

Now, let’s dive deeper into Jesus’s prayer struggle. Isaiah 53:12 describes the suffering Messiah: “He poured out his soul unto death and was numbered with the transgressors.” This spiritual struggle was an essential part of his sacrifice. I wonder which psalms came to Jesus’s mind as he sought words for his agony. How apt Psalm 6 would have been! Imagine Jesus on his face in Gethsemane, praying to the Father, who felt increasingly distant to him.

O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger,
nor discipline me in your wrath.
Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing;
heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled.
My soul also is greatly troubled.
But you, O Lord – how long?

Turn, O Lord, deliver my life;
save me for the sake of your steadfast love.
For in death there is no remembrance of you;
in Sheol who will give you praise?

I am weary with my moaning;
every night I flood my bed with tears;
I drench my couch with my weeping.
My eye wastes away because of grief;
it grows weak because of all my foes.

David wrote vividly of crushing trouble: soul's suffering, body's pain, heart's cries, and floods of tears. Death appeared as but the end, where all praise of God would be lost in the muffled darkness. It all felt like the anger of God falling fully upon him. David's striking poetic language would reach through the centuries to give words to an agony far deeper than his own. His lyrics would help Jesus give voice to his lament for a forsakenness far beyond David's worst experience.

Raniero Cantalamessa considers Gethsemane to reveal the "interior aspect of Jesus' passion: the death of the heart, which precedes and gives meaning to the death of the body. . . . Gethsemane signals the deepest depression in the passing of Jesus from this world to the Father."² What kind of sadness is that? Perhaps for Jesus it felt like this: To be pressed down with grief like an olive under a millstone. To have the weight of the world on his back, knowing he will be crushed by it. To fear, despite earlier predictions otherwise, that he will never get up again – and knowing that if he does not rise, neither will the world. All will have been in vain. All will be lost. All he wanted, all he prayed for, worked for, and yearned for will be gone. All the power he expended to heal will be for naught. All this world that he tasted with such joy will become ashes in his mouth. Everyone and everything he loves will be lost. Forever.

But worse, far worse, the presence he had always known is evaporating. The comforting assurance of his Father's love in his heart, felt since youth, is being taken away. Jesus feels that he is becoming repugnant to his Father. God, it seems, turns away his face. Such emptiness horrifies. The solid sense of everlasting arms underneath gives way to yawning abyss. Nothing awaits but endless darkness.

Hebrews takes us to the heart of Jesus's struggle in a passage with particular relevance to the event of Gethsemane:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him. (Hebrews 5:7-10)

Jesus recoils from what lies ahead. Any other man would quit in despair. But Jesus, on his knees and on his face, still speaks the cry of his soul directly: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (Matthew 26:39). In other words, "Get me out of this! Save me. Don't leave me. Do this another way. The horror is too much to bear. Abba, take this cup from me."

His Decision

Luke the beloved physician describes the physical effects of Jesus's suffering as he struggles to accept the cup obediently. "Being in an agony, he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:44). Here we may encounter what came to be called hematohidrosis,³ a rare but documented physical reaction to extreme stress: the bursting of the

capillaries under the skin so that blood comes through the pores. Jesus was in extreme psychological contradiction. His holy soul was being asked to accept as his own the full extent of human sin.

We are so jaded and compromised that we can hardly imagine such a conflict with sin in our person. As Hebrews tells us, "In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood" (Hebrews 12:4). We are used to being sinful. But Jesus would have shrunk in horror from the cup of heart-venom, the soul-slime of humanity, he was asked to drink. While all his days he had lived for his Father's will, now the divine will demanded that he become what he and his Father hated: sin itself. As Paul writes, "He made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The body's reaction to physical pain is to scream in our brains that something is wrong. We must move away from the source of pain; we must seek safety; we must end this threat. It takes extreme concentration based on preprogrammed knowledge of what leads to life and health to move into pain when a bone is reset or a wounded muscle stretched. It takes willpower based on an informed promise to put the burning drops in the eyes or accept the chemo treatment that will nearly kill us. Jesus moved into a pain unspeakably greater – the shame of the cross, the abhorrence of becoming a curse – because of what he knew to be ahead: the joy of saving us and sitting down at his Father's right hand (Hebrews 12:2). A joy he grasped from afar.

When all feeling of God's favor was gone, Jesus leaned on the Scriptures. He leaned on the sacred record of what his Father had done in the past and promised for the future. He recalled his baptism and the Father's voice. He recalled his mission. He recalled, though he could not feel its full force, the love that had passed between Father and Son from all eternity. He claimed their shared determination to save the world that had gone bad. "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). He prayed in that moment the very words he had taught his disciples to pray: "Our Father . . . your will be done" (Matthew 6:9-10).

The fate of the universe turned on this adamant will of fidelity. We can imagine how the powers of sin and evil howled at Jesus's soul. The accumulated rebel shout of every human heart, "Me! My way!" clamored for him to forget us and save himself. Yet Jesus silenced that roar with what might have been no more than a hoarse whisper: "Nevertheless." The lone human voice of faithfulness reverberated through the cacophony of our rebellion all the way back to Eden. At infinite cost to himself, Jesus answered his Father rightly for us.

In Gethsemane, Jesus made the revolting choice to drink the cup of wrath he did not deserve. The light of the world consented to be extinguished into the deepest darkness. Christ our life stepped into the waters of death and forsakenness in order that we might pass over them as safely as passing through dry land. Our innocent Passover Lamb gave himself to be sacrificed for us. The sinless one clasped to himself the contradiction of being made sin. He entered fully the olive press of Gethsemane.

Remarkably, after the titanic effort of consecrating his will in Gethsemane, Jesus seemed to shift from being troubled to being at peace. Though excruciating death awaited him, Jesus presented perfect equanimity before the chief priest, the Judean king, and the Roman governor. He had crossed the line between active temptation of choice and the peace of resolution. The agony would persist, but it would be clear that Jesus was master even of the powers that bound him.

What Can We Do for Him?

In Gethsemane, Jesus asked Peter, James, and John to "remain here, and watch with me" (Matthew 26:38). Of course, each time he returned, Jesus found them asleep. How the sad reproach must have pierced them with every memory in years to come: "So, could you not watch with me one hour?"

(Matthew 26:40). Christ's disciples through the centuries have felt their own similar weakness. We were not asked to carry the weight of sin or endure the cross, only to stay awake and keep him company. But we could not. Still, we yearn to. Just reading these accounts, we are attempting to watch and pray with Jesus, to enter his agony and somehow share it in a way that would bring him comfort.

C.S. Lewis captures the true affection of those who love the redeemer in a scene from *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. The great lion Aslan has offered his life in exchange for the petulant schoolboy Edmund, who had betrayed his siblings. On the night before Aslan is to be slain at the Stone Table, the two girls Lucy and Susan follow behind him, watching him, longing to comfort him. Filled with sadness, the lion allows the children to accompany him awhile:

Forward they went again and one of the girls walked on each side of the Lion. But how slowly he walked! And his great, royal head drooped so that his nose nearly touched the grass. Presently he stumbled and gave a low moan.

"Aslan! Dear Aslan!" said Lucy, "what is wrong? Can't you tell us?"

"Are you ill, dear Aslan?" asked Susan.

"No," said Aslan. "I am sad and lonely. Lay your hands on my mane so that I can feel you are there and let us walk like that."

And so the girls did what they would never have dared to do without his permission, but what they had longed to do ever since they first saw him: they buried their cold hands in the beautiful sea of fur and stroked it and, so doing, walked with him.⁴

The Messiah, the Anointed One, went to the olive press to be squeezed under the great stone of the world's sin. He went to unravel the fundamental error in the human heart. In this stage of his descent, he fell on his face in an agony of realization, experiencing his Father's repulsion to sin. In the garden of Gethsemane, the place of soul crushing, with his Father's presence receding and his own disciples fleeing, Jesus said, "Nevertheless, your will be done." He willingly entered being crushed under the weight of the world.

What can we do for him? In one sense, absolutely nothing: this is Jesus's work alone to save us. But in another sense, everything. We can do for him what he has been longing for since the beginning, in Eden. To keep him company. To stay near him. To place our hands on his hair and his shoulders. To anoint him with our tears at what it cost him. To abide with him. To love him who loves us so, who went so far into lonely forsakenness that we might not be alone. He passed through death and hell that we might pass over both safely.

Just the few words we have describing Gethsemane horrify us. We feel like intruders overhearing Jesus's intensely personal agony. We do not have an account of all that Jesus prayed for. But what we do have, we receive with fear and trembling that such a holy sight should be revealed to us. So this Holy Thursday, we keep vigil with Jesus, cleaving to him in adoration as we once more behold him on his face in prayer. And by our attention, we love him.

1. *That the World May Know*, disc 11, "Path to the Cross," directed by Focus on the Family, with Ray Vander Laan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), DVD. ↩

2. Raniero Cantalamessa, *The Mystery of Easter* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 23. ↩

3. "What Is Hematidrosis?" WebMD, February 3, 2020, <https://www.webmd.com/a-to-z-guides/hematidrosis-hematohidrosis>. ↩

4. C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: MacMillan, 1950), 120-21. ↩