

In the Garden of Agony

By
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“And being in an agony, he prayed more earnestly and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Luke 22:44)

Three famous gardens figure largely in human history and in the story of redemption’s plan. They are the Garden of Eden, the Garden of Gethsemane, and the garden of our Savior’s tomb. During this Lenten season it is fitting to turn our thoughts again to those destiny deciding events that occurred in the Garden of Gethsemane.

It was on that dark Thursday night when the battle of the ages was fought to a finish in the soul of the Son of God, that night when the vanquished Galilean trod the wine press alone, that terrible night when Judas Iscariot walked out of the presence of the Light of the World into that place of outer darkness, that night of the traitorous kiss. It was about midnight when Jesus led the eleven disciples out of the room of the Last Supper, down through the winding streets, across the Brook Kidron, and out into the familiar haunts of Gethsemane. It was not only midnight in the hour glass of old Jerusalem; it was midnight in the heart of a world that was rejecting the only Savior they ever had.

He left eight of his disciples near the garden gate. Three he took a little farther. But by himself he went into the inner garden and there prayed. There has been many great men of prayer in by gone days. They have prayed prayers that were soaked in tears and filled with sobs and grief. But no man ever entered into an agony of prayer like Jesus in the garden. Elijah prayed until the heavens were closed. He prayed again and the heavens gave rain. Solomon prayed until the whole nation of Israel was moved to tears.

Daniel prayed until the lion's jaws were locked. Paul and Silas prayed until the earth quaked and unlocked their prison doors, setting the captives free. But no man ever prayed until his sweat was great drops of blood.

Meditating upon the agonizing scene in Gethsemane, we are compelled to observe that our Savior there endured a grief unknown to man. Let us raise the question: what was the cause of this peculiar grief? During his life he had lived at perfect peace with God at all times. He was meek and lowly at heart and his soul had rest. I think that our Lord was a happy man. The peace and fellowship he had with God made him happy. But in Gethsemane all seems changed. His peace is gone; his calm is turned into a tempest. After supper our Lord had sung a hymn. But there was no singing in Gethsemane. As he walked from Jerusalem to Kedron, he talked cheerily with his disciples about the vine and the branches. But it is much different inside Gethsemane's walls when he cries out and says, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me."

As he approached this last grim struggle among the old olive trees, he said, "My soul is sorrowful even unto death." Mark tells us that he began to be sore amazed and very heavy. The suffering Savior could not and did not seem to wish to conceal his grief in the garden. Back and forth to this disciple for three times he ran as if to gain some help from men.

We are sure that this deep distress and sorrow was not occasioned by any bodily pain. It is true of him that he took our sickness, but he never in any previous instance complained of physical suffering. Neither was it bereavement, disappointment, contempt, or scorn. He had endured all this before. They had charged him with everything from being a wine bibber to being possessed of devils. Despite the cruel words, he had endured

it all without a word. But here there is something sharper than pain, more cutting than reproach, more terrible than bereavement which now grappled with the Savior and baptized him in a bloody sweat. We cannot believe that it was the dread and fear of death that caused this agony. It is true that to die is a new experience to every one and the instincts of self-preservation cause us to shrink back from it. But surely in the case of our Lord, this could not be it. He had stood in the presence of death before and calmly exclaimed, "I am the resurrection and the life."

He had been rebuffed by Satan, attacked by men and devils, but he never quailed; not from the Jews, not from the traitor Judas, not from the sleeping disciples. This trial came not from the Devil, but it was a bitter cup from his Father, a cup appointed to him not to be drunk by his body to spend its gall upon his flesh, but a cup which amazed his soul and wrung the very life's blood from his heart. This was the hour when it pleased the Father to bruise him and make his soul an offering for sin. He was now about to taste death for every man, to bear the curse that was due to sinners, to suffer in the sinners' stead.

The soul of the Savior had always abhorred sin, but now he had to intently fix his mind upon its horrible nature. His thoughts were completely engrossed in it. He saw its deadly nature, its heinous character, its horrible aim. It was there that he was to be looked upon by God as if he were all the sinners in all the world and as if he had committed all the sins of all men. Thus, he had to appear before the Judgment Bar of God's justice and receive the penalty for all sin. The stroke of the divine justice upon his trembling soul was that bitter cup. All Hell was distilled into that cup which our Savior was made to drink. It was like a great and fathomless ocean breaking over his soul. The very spray

from that tempestuous deep as it fell on Christ baptized him in a bloody sweat. He had not yet come to the raging billows of the penalty itself, but even standing on the shore, as he heard the awful surf breaking at his feet, his soul was sore amazed and very heavy. It was the shadow of the coming tempest. It was the prelude to the dread desertion which he had to endure, to be treated as a sinner, to be smitten as a sinner. This is what caused the agony in the garden.

It was not physical pain. It was not palpitation of the heart or an aching brow. It was worse than that. Trouble of spirit is worse than pain of body. Our Lord's main suffering lay in his soul. Ten thousand poison darts of Hell seemed to be riddling the very fibers of his soul. Pain of spirit is the worst of pain. Sorrow of heart is the climax of grief. His position as the sin-bearer separated him from God. And his rejection by men left him as a man without a country, without a home, without a hope, alone in the dark night of agony, standing forsaken among the ruins and wreckage of a lost world, staggering by the astounding calamity of being cut off from all human and divine ties, left to suffer and die alone. We know that the cold, clammy sweat of dying men comes through faintness of body, but the bloody sweat of Jesus came from an utter prostration of his soul. He was in an awful soul swoon and suffered an inward death accompanied not with watery tears from the eyes but a weeping of blood from the entire man. There was a battle between the attributes of his nature, a battle on an epic scale in the arena of his soul. It was a struggle on a titanic level as if two great giants had met in a battle to the death. Two tremendous forces strove and fought and agonized within the bleeding heart of Jesus.

The full moon cast its silvery rays through the broken bows of the old olive trees. The night winds sighed mournfully and gently rustled the leaves overhead. Heaven above

frowned down on the lone Galilean with bitter justice. Hell from beneath sang his funeral dirge and sent ten thousand demons to surge around him and break up the very fiber of his soul, threatening to burst his great heart and still his pulse. But in that hour of loneliness and bitterness,

when his disciples had left him to pray alone,

when Hell's artillery let loose its terrible blasts of fury upon him,

when the black sins of the world like a million vampires of the night flooded over his soul, and

when God his Father let the burning shafts of justice ravish his soul until it let the great drops of bloody sweat run down to the ground, he looked up from those depressing shadows of death and Hell and with one last great scream of allegiance to God's will said, "Not my will but thine be done." With that cry of submission he tapped the reservoir of God's abounding grace for all time, gave the Devil an incurable wound, satisfied the claims of an offended God, drank the dregs of the cup of Hell's bitter broth, and called a lost world from the isolated hills of damnation to peace and reconciliation to God. We are all by this alone under an eternal obligation to God.

For none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed,
Or how dark was the night that the Lord passed through
Ere he found the sheep that was lost
Out on the mount, wild and high,
Sick and helpless and ready to die.

Lord, whence are these blood drops along the way
That mark the mountain path.
They were shed for a sheep that went astray
Ere the shepherd could bring him back.
Lord, why are thy hands so rent and torn?
They are riven today by many a thorn. (author unknown)