



**BELIEVERS CHAPEL**

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew

“The Agony in Gethsemane,” Matthew 26:36-46

Will you turn with me to Matthew chapter 26 and listen as I read verses 36 through 46 for the Scripture reading? Matthew chapter 26 verse 36 through verse 46,

“Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane, and saith unto the disciples, Sit here, while I go and pray yonder. And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be very sorrowful and very heavy. Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry here, and watch with me. And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt. And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done.”

It’s very interesting that this second petition in the Matthean account is slightly different from the first. There may be some question about whether much should be made over it but it does seem to me that there is an advance in this petition. You’ll notice he does not say, nevertheless not as I will. And then he also puts it in such a way as that it appears that he has received the answer from the Father and now accepts that. We shall talk in a moment about how this of course takes place in his human nature. Accepts it and says simply, Thy will be done.

“And he came and found them asleep again: for their eyes were heavy. And he left them, and went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. Then cometh he to his disciples, and saith unto them, Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray me.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his word. Let’s bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we confess as we contemplate the incident that we shall seek to expound this morning that it is far beyond our comprehension and far beyond our ability to adequately do justice to what happened when our Lord Jesus was upon that ground, crying out these very, very significant words, “O my Father if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.”

How limited Lord is our human understanding of divine truth, and we confess that we look forward with great anticipation to the future when we shall come into a deeper understanding of all that was involved in the accomplishment of our salvation. We want to worship Thee. We want to praise Thee. We have, Lord, by virtue of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the conviction of the majesty of the divine word and the truthfulness of it,

and the truthfulness and gracious and mercy of our great God. And we know Lord there are depths in Thy person and being which we shall never be able to comprehend, but we look forward with anticipation to the unfolding of the richness of the person of our God, and so Lord we thank Thee and we praise Thee. We bless Thee for a Savior who loved us and loosed us from our sins through the sacrifice of his own blood.

We ask, Lord, Thy blessing upon this congregation, upon each individual member of it, the old the young and the children. O Father, may the blessings that Thou dost have for each one of us be truly ours in experience. Give the young, vision. Give them dedication, and give them, O Lord, the comprehension to determine their own priorities for their lives, and if it should please Thee, Lord, may the interests of our great God be paramount. And for those of us, Lord, who are older, Lord we pray that Thou wilt enable us to use our time to glorify Thy name. We pray that if there should be someone here present who does not yet have the assurance of everlasting life, that that may come through the preaching of the word. We pray that the Holy Spirit may use the Scriptures and the truth of them to bring them to life.

We pray for the entire church of Jesus Christ and ask Lord Thy blessing upon each individual member. How wonderful it is, Lord, to know that we are part of that which Thou hast been doing, and we praise Thee for the membership that we enjoy through faith in the Lord Jesus. We pray that Thou wilt enlarge the church today through the preaching of the word if it be Thy will, but strengthen us and edify us and build us up in our faith and enable us, Lord to touch the lives of those outside the body who belong to the elect of our great triune God.

We pray, Lord Thy blessing upon this country, upon our president, upon our government. We thank Thee for the privilege of life in the United States of America, and Lord, we pray also Thy blessing upon every activity of the members of this congregation that has as its ultimate goal the glorification of our God. Be with us throughout this particular service and the service of this evening. For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

Many of you who at least are a little older than the young ones in our congregation will be familiar with Winston Churchill’s great history of World War II, and many of you remember that one of the volumes of his World War history was entitled *The Gathering Storm*. I think that one may liken the experience of our Lord Jesus in his earthly life to a gathering storm, and if we may, for the sake of identification, say that the transfiguration account at which it became evident that the suffering of the Lord Jesus was plainly before him, if we may call that account “the gathering storm” of the life our Lord, when we come to the agony in Gethsemane we see the first sheets of rain falling from the skies. It is well known as one studies the Scriptures that at the summits of the life of our Lord Jesus, he saw in his human nature the cross as the consummation of his ministry. The form may not have been so clear but the fact was very clear.

Now let me say right at the beginning that when I say, in his human nature, I want to stress that because, of course, from his divine nature from his from the fact that he was a divine person we of course are certain that he knew all of the facts of his life from the beginning to the end, from time immemorial. We are speaking in the sphere of his humanity as is evidenced by the fact that when this account is over, the angels came and ministered to him. God does not need the ministry of angels. He may subsist without them, and so we are speaking in the area of our Lord’s humanity.

Now coming to this idea that he did, at the summits of his life, see his ministry in his human nature you can notice this for example in his temptation. It is evident that the cross is seen by him in measure then at Cana of Galilee, when the wedding took place. The things that happened there remind him of the fact that his hour had not yet come.

When he was on the mountainside and fed the five thousand it was at that time too that the lines of his suffering were plain to him. On the Mount of Transfiguration that was seen.

When the Greeks came and said, we would see Jesus, that provoked in him a truly remarkable response. If one does not understand, that it’s suggested again the fact that

his suffering was not far in the future. When they came to the disciples and said, we would see Jesus, it’s suggested to him immediately that it would not be long before the message that he had come to proclaim to the Nation Israel would go out to the four corners of the world and would comprehend the Gentiles as well. So when they said, being Greeks, we would see Jesus, it suggested to him that fact and reminded him that his suffering was not far off. Right at that time he said, “Now is my soul troubled,” because the thought of the cross is brought before him again prominently. And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour. But for this cause came I unto this hour; Father glorify Thy name. So it’s evident then that our Lord entered into in his human nature the personal experience of the gradual comprehension in full of what he was going to suffer.

The church, in its study and in its discussion of the passion of our Lord has acknowledged that there was a progress in the sufferings of our Lord. We know that the latter part of his suffering is so great that it was given a special name. In the Heidelberg catechism, it is said that he suffered all the time that he lived on earth, but especially at the end of his life. And the Christian church came to call that the *paseo magna* or the Great Suffering. In fact, the Lord Jesus seems to specifically support that, for he says, “With desire have I desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.” So he himself thought of his cross as the climax of the suffering, the *paseo magna*, the great passion, though the passion itself comprehends in measure all of his previous lifetime.

Now we know also that the suffering of our Lord was not simply his own, of his own doing. We know, of course, that the actions of the world are subject to the providential hand of God. It is true, Mr. Pryor is right, God has not lost his grip on things, and this is beautifully seen in the work of our Lord’s redemption. For, while it is true that the world was responsible for the death of our Lord Jesus, it is also true that he himself gave himself voluntarily, and it is also true that, not only working alongside the will of the Son and the will of the world, but actually working through these wills, there was the

ultimate will of the Father who was in control of all of the experiences, and all of the events in the life of our Lord.

You remember that in the Old Testament it is, Thou hast brought me into the dust of death. It pleased the Lord to bruise him. In the New Testament the Lord Jesus says, shortly after this incident, “The cup that my Father hath given shall I not drink it?” It is the Father that has given him the cup, and so working through the activities of men the Father accomplishes his purpose.

Now we see that I think beautifully here. The sufferings of our Lord were the work of the Son. They were the work of the world. They were the work of Satan. But ultimately and primarily they were the work of God. And it was he who was accomplishing the redemptive sacrifice that would inaugurate the new covenant by which all who are saved have salvation.

No one would question the historicity of the account in Gethsemane. It seems to me that its historicity is beyond question. The early church would never have created this picture of our Lord wallowing upon the ground, crying out, O my Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me. An early church that believed in the deity of the Son of God would not ever have created this picture of him which suggests so many questions. The very fact that they included it in their accounts, and we see it in Matthew, and we see it in Mark, and we see it in Luke – they all thought it was that important. The very fact that we see this account in the gospels is evidence of the truthfulness of these accounts.

In the history of the early church there were individuals in the world who took advantage of the picture that is presented of our Lord in Gethsemane. Selsius in the 2nd Century and Julian the Apostate in the 4<sup>th</sup> all jeered at our Lord’s suffering in Gethsemane, pointing out that it was an illustration of cowardice and pusillanimity as over against the magnanimity with which a person ought to die, and there is an historical account of a wretch in the day of Henry IV of France who, when he was going to his execution, made fun of our Lord dying in the garden and on the cross in such evident suffering and such

evident dereliction of spirit while he himself, this wretch, was going to his death fearless and courageous. So this is an account that is truly historical. I think, of course, all of the accounts of the gospel are historical, but this is one that is extremely important and it is clearly historical.

That night, if you had been looking for him, you would have noticed the profound Sodom-like security, as someone has said, that pervaded the city of Jerusalem at this time. With Jacob you might well have cried out, “How dreadful is this place!” A prayer in the upper room had been concluded. The hymns had been sung. The Great Hallel had been finished, and while the notes may have been wafted across the breeze of that night, the apostles, the eleven with our Lord had left the upper room and had made their way down toward the Brook Kidron.

They had crossed over the brook, had gone up a little bit of a rise and there had come to the garden of Gethsemane. Gethsemane, incidentally, means “wine press” and so it suggests in itself that this is to be a place of struggle, of deep struggle of soul. And that night, if you had been there, you would have come upon the Eight: Matthew, Simon, some of the lesser known of the apostles. Eight of them were on the outside where they had been left by the Lord Jesus. You might have missed Judas, but he was off finishing his nefarious deed of betraying the Lord Jesus.

Then as you moved into the garden, you would have come across the three of the apostles who were so often with our Lord in the more intimate experiences of his life: Peter, James and John, and you may have been surprised that there they were flopped out asleep.

And then going on a little farther into the garden, you would have noticed our Lord. Things were happening that night. Judas was being sifted and was being shown to be all chaff. Peter and the rest of the apostles were being sifted as well as, shown to be part chaff and part wheat. But our Lord is entering into the greatest experience of all, and of course he is all wheat.

The text of Scripture says in the 1<sup>st</sup> verse of the passage that we are looking at, that the Lord Jesus said, “Sit here while I go and pray yonder.” I know it might seem to be a spirit of braggadocio that leads an expositor to say, I think I know what he was saying, when there is no statement in Scripture to the effect that there is a particular prayer that he was praying, but if you will put the this affair by the side of the last Ppassover and the first Lord’s Supper, you will notice that there is one word that appears in both of them that is very significant. And of course it’s the word, cup. O my Father if it be possible let this cup – very specific cup, incidentally; I’ll say something about it in a moment – but this cup, and we remember that in the last Passover and the first Lord’s Supper he had according to verse 27 of this passage taken the cup and gave thanks and gave it to them saying, drink you all (y’all remember) [laughter] drink y’all of it, for this is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for many for the remission of sins. So the cup suggests the shedding of the blood by which the covenant was inaugurated.

So it seems to me very, very certain that what our Lord was praying about when he went beyond the three off into the center of the garden by himself and offered his petition to God, it was surely prayer in view of the Passion, the *paseo magna*, which he must soon experience. So he went in to pray and it was the most significant praying that Jesus Christ had ever done.

Now the text of Scripture says that he began to be sorrowful. He began to be very heavy. The New Scofield edition of the King James Version has “very depressed.” Now it seems to me that is a very weak rendering, because depression suggests maladjustment today, and so I think the way the old Authorized Version translators rendered it is perfectly good. He began to be very sorrowful and very heavy, heavy of spirit because of the suffering and the trial that was just before him.

It was evident that if you had looked at him you would have noticed the agitation of spirit which characterized our Lord. It was visible before he spoke. We read in verse 39 after he has said, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death.” Someone has

said I think it was Clarence McCartney the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburg and a very noted expositor in his day, that this was a literal fact, that he was sorrowful even unto death and that one more pang and his physical frame would have given way. Well we probably cannot know that, but these words are very strong words. He was exceedingly sorrowful even unto death.

And then putting the accounts together, it says that our Lord went farther into the garden. He fell on his knees first, Luke tells us. So he began to pray on his knees which was probably the natural place or position for him to be in when he prayed, but evidently he could not even stand being upon his knees, and then fell on his face, on the ground groveling on the ground like a worm, reminding us of the statement in Psalm 22, “I am a worm and no man.” And so our Lord falls on his face upon the ground. The agitation is obvious. It’s deep. It controls him and it’s then that he cries out, O my Father, if it be possible.

One of the old commentators, a Puritan by the name of Robert Trail whose works have recently been republished has a comment concerning this that I think is very appropriate. He said, “He filled the silent night with his crying and watered the cold earth with his tears more precious than the dew of Hermon or any moisture next unto his own blood that ever fell on God’s earth since the creation. No wonder he’s called ‘the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.’”

Now his petition, “O my Father if it be possible let this cup pass from me.” Incidentally, there are two great themes in all of the atoning work of the Lord Jesus, and of course there is the theme of the love of God which our 20th Century so often likes to stress even to the exclusion of the other. Our God is a loving God, our God is a merciful God, our God is a forgiving God—all very true but all so false if not seen against the other things that make up the character of our Lord. The attribute of his love and mercy is great, but the attributes of his holiness and his justice are just as significant for us. And you can see when he cries out, O my Father and you think of the love of God and the

mercy of God and all of those things that minister to us of the divine compassion, but then you hear this one say, O my Father if it be possible, let this cup pass from me, and we are reminded of the other aspect of our Lord’s character: his holiness and his justice. And our Lord Jesus honored the sanctity of the law of God and what he required for redemption.

Now isn’t it striking that he says, cup? That of course is a figure. It’s a figure of his death. It’s plain. He’s just said, this cup is my blood of the New Testament which is shed – not spilled, but shed – remember as we said last Sunday. It’s a word of sacrifice it’s a word of slaughter. It suggests the shedding of a sacrificial animal, in this case the antetype, the Lord Jesus. He was sacrificed for our sins. He could never have atoned if he had died of a heart attack. When the Bible speaks of the blood of Christ, it speaks of more than simply death: it’s violent death, it’s sacrificial death that is in mind. This cup.

Now we’ve had other figures in the Gospel of Matthew. He said he spoke about his baptism with which he should be baptized, and you think of him being plunged into the water as John the Baptist had plunged the repentant Israelites into the water. That’s a figure of his death his baptism. And then of course he has spoken of his death as a road. He has said the Son of man goes as it is written concerning him, but woe unto that man through whom the Son of man is betrayed. So he has spoken of his death as a baptism, he has spoken of his death as a road or as a way that he must traverse, and now here he speaks of it as a cup.

James Denny the Scottish theologian said, “It was the cup which our sins had mingled.” So it is the cup that he speaks about here. And did you notice too that he says this cup? It is not a cup. This cup. It’s this, unique cup. It is this cup that is given him by a hand that is extended from the hills of eternity. It is the cup concerning which the eternal Trinity had made their compact in the ages past. It is the cup of the everlasting covenant made between the persons of the triune God. So here is the moment in time about which our great God had spoken, discussed, planned throughout all the centuries

of time before this, and even before that into the ages past. What a significant moment this was. O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me—this cup, the one we’ve been talking about, the one we’ve had upon our hearts from the ages past.

Now what does he mean when he says, O my Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me? What does this tortured petition mean? There is a fairly well known Dutch commentator whose writings I have read a good bit. He has an interesting interpretation of this. He has said that what our Lord was really praying was that he would not die under the assault of Satan in the garden, because if he should die in the garden, he would not be able to accomplish the conclusion of the work on the cross. And this commentator goes on to suggest – it’s very suggestive in certain ways – that it was in the garden that the Son suffered from the Father. It was on the cross a few hours later that he suffered from the world. Perhaps we could add it was in the garden that he suffered from the Father and from Satan; it was on the cross that he suffered from men.

And it is the conclusion of this author that he actually accomplished the redemption for all intents and purposes in the garden, rather than on the cross, and the evidence of this is that he was troubled and in deep distress in the garden, but on the cross he is triumphant. He looks out, he sees Mary and he turns from Mary to John and says, Woman behold thy son and then to John behold thy mother. He is in complete control when he hangs upon the cross, but he’s not in control in that way in the garden. It’s a very interesting interpretation. It reminds us of something Adam Clark said. He said, “Jesus paid more in the garden than he did on the cross.” And even Charles Haddon Spurgeon, whose writings and ministry you know I admire very much, said that as far as he was concerned, “It would be wrong to say that our Lord Jesus accomplished his atonement only on the cross.”

Now it’s not often that I must disagree with Mr. Spurgeon, but in this case I must admit that I do disagree. I think atonement was accomplished on the cross. Many years ago, when I was a theological student at the seminary here, I was making a study of this

very incident and reading this Dutch commentator. It’s been thirty years ago now, but I can still remember reading those pages which I have read since, and I was still in the insurance business back in those days. I used to work [laughter] and going to seminary at the same time, and I remember we had some special meetings in Scofield Memorial Church which in those days was located down on Harwood and Brown.

And since I was working in the Cotton Exchange Building in an insurance office rather than going home, I went on over to the church after I finished my work for that afternoon, waiting for the meeting that night. And when I came in Dr. Harry Ironside who was the speaker that night was sitting over by himself, and nobody else was there but just the two of us, so I thought I have chance. Here is a well known Bible teacher, and I have this question I’ve been wrestling with. I’ll go over and ask him a question.

I was a little embarrassed about sitting on the same pew with him, so I went over and sat on the pew right behind him and leaned over and said, “Dr. Ironside, do you mind if I ask you a question?” It was obvious he did mind. He turned around and thought well, I know I could see it all over his face, now what kind of stupid question will this young theologian be asking me? But with the brashness of a young theological student I said, “Dr. Ironside I have been reading something that’s very interesting. I’m kind of attracted to it. I’d like to know your opinion. And I unfolded all that I have spoken to you about here to him, and he just looked back to me with a disdainful look on his face and said, simply, “I believe atonement was accomplished on the cross.”

And as he said it, there was a text of the Epistle to the Colossians that came home to me right as he was speaking. I guess the Holy Spirit must have thought, well, now, we will settle the question once and for all, and he unfolded and gave me this particular text and as he said those words, the words of the Apostle Paul in from Colossians chapter 1, came home to me in which the apostle says, “He made peace by the blood of the cross.” I’ve never had any doubt after that that atonement was accomplished on the cross and not anywhere else. He made peace by the blood of the cross. Other things may be essential

all other things may be important and necessary as preparation, but he made atonement by the blood of the cross. Therefore I never have been able to accept this very interesting theory.

Now many of you know I was led to the Lord by Donald Gray Barnhouse, and I have a great high regard for Dr. Barnhouse, but Dr. Barnhouse had a peculiar interpretation of this passage. It was Dr. Barnhouse’s point that if our Lord said, O my Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me, he would be praying that he should not go to the cross, but he has already, several times – at least three clear times previous to this – said, he was going to Jerusalem. He was going to suffer. He was going to die, be put to death. He was going to be buried, and he was going to rise again on the third day. So Dr. Barnhouse said, “How can the Son of God pray, O my Father let this cup pass from me, when he has already said that he was going to the cross?” And Doctor Barnhouse went on to say that if he did pray that, he couldn’t be our Savior because he would have prayed something outside the will of God.

Well I do appreciate Dr. Barnhouse very much. I’ve learned a great many things from him and still learn things from him. But I cannot accept this. Because you remember our Lord said that he was going to go to Jerusalem, he was going to suffer, he was going to die, and he was going to be raised again on the third day. Well now, Dr. Barnhouse’s interpretation is that since he was not praying that he should not die on the cross, he must have been praying that he should not die eternally, so that it was a prayer concerning his eternal death and when he said, O my Father let this cup pass from me, he was saying, O God let me not die the second death; let me not die eternally. Let me come through this experience to life.

Now of course he did do that. But the very words that our Lord used to announce his death were words that announced his resurrection. He said on the third day I will rise again from the dead. So how is it possible on Dr. Barnhouse’s interpretation for our Lord to pray, O my Father if it be possible let this cup of eternal death pass from me, since he

had already said he was going to rise again on the third day? The very thing that caused him, causes Dr. Barnhouse to reject the traditional interpretation argues against his own interpretation.

So I cannot accept that. Now I don’t think that he will meet me in heaven and say, Lewis never should have said that never should have spoken against me there. [Laughter] I think I’m going to be able to say I think you were wrong at that point Dr. Barnhouse, but time will tell. The Christian church has interpreted this traditionally as a prayer that if it should be within the Lord’s will, this way of the cross might not be taken. In other words, it was a prayer of deliverance from the cross if it should be the will of God.

Now I think that is what is meant here. It seems to be very plainly that what our Lord is saying is, O my Father if it be possible let this cup pass from me; nevertheless not what I will but what Thou wilt. In other words he guarded this petition by the expression of his total willingness to do the will of God if that was necessary. Many years ago my daughter, when she was just about thirteen years old, came home from school when I was studying this account, and I was going over these things, and I’ve always felt that it was good to ask the children what things meant as well as to ask the theologians, because sometimes the children see clearer than the theologians. In fact, I guess we could probably say very often in a congregation like this which is used to studying the word of God many of our children see things that the greatest contemporary theologians do not see at all. For that we give thanks to God.

But I asked my daughter I said, “Do you think our Lord Jesus sinned when he prayed, since he had said he was going to die, O my Father if it be possible let this cup pass from me; nevertheless not my will but Thine be done?” And I remember her saying, “Oh no, Daddy. He was not sinning. He was just asking was it necessary that the death transpire.” And of course we could add in his human nature. That’s the traditional interpretation the Christian church has put on this. I see no reason for abandoning

tradition. It was a testing. It was a trial that he must face, but there is no sin. You know there is no easy Calvary, even for our Lord, and let me stress it was in our Lord’s human nature that this trial was taking place.

Now he prays the second petition. I will not for the sake of time say anything about it. And finally he prays the same word for a third time after which the angel of God came strengthening him. Now the angels coming and strengthening him is evidence that this was in his human nature. It is in that that the trial truly takes place. In a moment the Lord Jesus, in the midst of the garden when the Roman soldiers come with Judas, stands up and triumphantly says, the Father which the cup hath given me, the cup which the Father hath given me shall I not drink it? So he has triumphantly traversed this test on the way to Calvary.

Now may I conclude with a couple of questions? Why the agony of Gethsemane? Why the shrinking?

Now the Greek liturgy says that when our Lord suffered they were unknown sufferings. I grant that. No one of us in this auditorium, least of all I, understands perfectly the sufferings of our Lord Jesus. In fact, I think after we’ve been in heaven for a thousand years we’ll understand more but we’ll just be beginning to understand what happened when our Lord suffered in Calvary and at Calvary. And when we’ve been there for thousands and thousands of years we still will be learning some of the reasons why our Lord suffered and what it really meant for him to suffer. So these were his unknown sufferings, but why did he who promised peace seem so emotionally depressed, heavy upset?

Was it the grief of broken family ties? Nobody ever loved as our Lord did. Nobody ever loved his father and mother as our Lord did. The Old Testament says that we are to honor our father and mother. No one ever more perfectly fulfilled that than the Lord Jesus. Was it the grief of these broken family ties; he was to leave Mary, he was to

leave his family? Well I’m sure there was grief in his human nature, but it cannot explain the agony.

Was it the loneliness of fear and misunderstanding—human fear—don’t misunderstand. Misunderstanding? I don’t think anybody was ever more misunderstood than our Lord Jesus Christ. Christians are misunderstood by members of their family who are not Christians. Christians are misunderstood by the world who are not Christians. They do not understand. But when you magnify that to infinity, you have some idea of our Lord’s misunderstanding by others. He said, “Smite the shepherd and the sheep shall be scattered abroad.” They did not understand. Was it the loneliness of misunderstanding?

He said, according to the prophet, “I’ve trodden the wine press alone and of the people there was none with me.” When he was hanging on the cross he was alone. Peter was not there supporting him. The other apostles were not there supporting him. Even John, the one who leans on his breast, is not there supporting him. They all forsook him and fled, the Scriptures say.

Well that was great, but that doesn’t explain the agony. Was it the shame of the Roman gibbet? For after all, when a person died by crucifixion, he was dying as a criminal. He was obedient unto death and such a death as a death of the cross. The Greek text of Philippians 2:8 says, stressing the kind of death that he died, the death of a common criminal. Think of it. He was numbered with the transgressors; the eternal God with the transgressing multitude of vile, wicked, sinful men. That was, no doubt agony, but that cannot explain the agony of Gethsemane. Was it the anguish of suspense over God’s will? We sometimes forget the Lord Jesus had to find the will of God just as you and I find the will of God in his human nature.

Now the difference between our Lord and us is this. When we come to know the will of God, we still have the further problem of obedience, which is so often beyond us. In our Lord’s case, he learned obedience through the things which he suffered, and he

never disobeyed. When the will of God was made known to him by the Father, he implicitly obeyed. But he did not necessarily know what the will of the Father was for him next. He said, as a matter of fact, the words that he spoke, they were given to him by the Father. The things that he did they were given to him by the Father. So each day he had as a human being to pass through the experience of finding the will of God. So was it the anguish of suspense over God’s will? Was it our Lord crying upon the ground in Gethsemane, O Father is this truly Thy will? And is the time, is this the hour? Well that would be of course agony, but again I don’t think it explains the agony of Gethsemane.

Was it the hellish ordeal of demonic opposition? He said himself: This is your hour; the hour of darkness. So was it the struggle with Satan? Is this the reason for the agony? No. Was it the horror of contact with sin? He was exceeding sorrowful. He is a man astonished, alarmed, taken aback, because now this holy Son of God must come into contact with the curse. Is it really the fact that he’s thinking about what it means to be identified with human evil?

Well I know that must have been agony for him. That accounts for the hemotidrosis or the perspiring of the great drops of blood, great gouts of blood, in which the intense agony forces the blood out through the veins. Some of the capillaries of the sweat glands break and the blood is mingled with the perspiration. We say perspiration down South.

But anyway that was great. That suffering was tremendous. I am sure if you if you could just think for one moment of a little girl, innocent in measure, holy, brought up in a lovely home, taught the word of God, and then at age six, seven, eight, nine, being forced to go to live in a house of prostitution. The revulsion that comes over the spirit at thinking about something like that. Magnify it to infinity and you have only a faint understanding of what it must have meant for the Son of God to come into contact with sin. That would be agony for him. But while that’s agony, I don’t think that accounts for the agony of Gethsemane.

You see, I don’t think there is any way to explain this other than to say it was the agony of the anticipation of the divine condemnation upon sin. It was the agony of the curse of the broken law. It was the agony of becoming the sin offering. It was the agony of the contemplation of the experiencing of eternal death for us. That’s the only thing that can explain this. You know, the word that is used in Matthew chapter 26, He began to be sorrowful and very heavy. That word in the Greek text is a word which in its derivation means “away from home.” He began to feel away from home. He began to feel something of the separation that would ultimately manifest itself fully and completely when he cried out, “My God, my God why hast Thou forsaken me?” It is the agony of being forsaken because he has become the skin offering for sinners. That’s the only thing that can explain our Lord wallowing and groveling in the ground, crying out, O my Father if it be possible let this cup pass from me; nevertheless not my will but Thine be done. And if this is the only way he says in a moment, Thy will be done. Death and the curse were in our cup. O Christ was full for thee.

Now you know there are people who tell us that our Lord died as an example. Isn’t that amazing? How anyone can read the Bible and say the Lord Jesus died simply as an example. We know he died as an example, but simply as an example? How could you explain this? If our Lord is the example of the way we should die, he is not our Lord. Why should we die wallowing upon the ground? Why should we die crying out, O my God, my God why hast Thou forsaken me? Even the saints of God have died better than that outwardly speaking. They’ve died with words of thanksgiving and praise upon their lips. No the inadequacy of the exemplary view of the sufferings of our Lord is never more easily seen than in Gethsemane and later in Calvary. He died as a penal substitute for our sins. He died there under the judgment of God. Something you and I will never know, never could know. And thank God we shall not know if we have, by the grace of God come to know him as our substitute in whom we have already borne our sins.

Well my second question – time is up, so I’ll just mention this. What’s the application of this? Well of course, we think of the perfection of our high priest. We know he is the kind of high priest to whom we may come boldly because of the sufferings. We know the power of prayer as we see it in his own life. We can see the way that we have victory shattering human nature, yielding to the indomitable will of God. And when we learn to pray, we must learn to pray not only some of what our Lord prayed, but all of his prayer. O my Father, if it be possible; nevertheless not my will but Thine be done. Every human petition should be prayed in the light of those last words.

But most of all we learn the passion of our Lord for his souls. Someone has said in Gethsemane he said in effect, I’m willing, and on Calvary he said, it is finished.

There is a story that one of the expositors of the word of God tells about a visit that he had to a Scottish naval officer who was retired. After they had had a lovely day in Scotland, he was asked by this Scottish naval officer to read before they went to bed, and he gave him the prayer book which I presume was an Anglican prayer book. And the minister said as he opened the prayer book and looked at it, he noticed the petitions all concluded with the words, For Christ’s sake, but he also noticed that there were two lines drawn through every one of these last words, For Christ’s sake. Two petitions, so that they were not read by that man.

Well he asked him, why is it that you have crossed out these petitions, the words, For Christ’s sake? Well he explained to the preacher that his idea of God was such that he did not need to be coaxed to forgive sinners, and that all that was necessary was for him to own up to his wrong doing and God would forgive him. And so the preacher went on and he read the prayers and then afterwards he began to talk, and he said he talked for a good while about sin. He talked about human faults and human evil, and he talked about human willfulness and then he went on to talk about the sanctity of God’s law and how God is very concerned about the sanctity of his law and his will, and then he went on and talked about the atonement, and it was evident it was having its effect,

because finally near the end of the talk the older man turned to the preacher and said,  
“That’s a better gospel than mine.”

And with that he said, we knelt down and we gave thanks that God for Christ’s sake had forgiven him. You know those little words, For Christ’s sake, stress the fact that it is the atonement that is the ground of all forgiveness. It is a better gospel than any kind of human gospel. O my Father; if it be possible. But it was not possible. That’s the point. It was not possible. Salvation cannot come apart from a penal substitute who dies for us. O may God speak to your heart to that end.

If you’re here and you’ve never believed in the Lord Jesus, we call upon you by the grace of God acknowledge your sin, acknowledge your guilt, acknowledge the holiness of the divine law and receive as a free gift the salvation that God offers to sinners. May God speak to your heart to that end. Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we are so grateful to Thee for the words of holy Scripture, for these difficult words as well as the simple words. And we give Thee thanks that Thou hast spoken to our hearts concerning our own desperate need our human sin. How guilty we were. How great was the atoning sacrifice. Lord, if there are some here who have not yet come, O God, give no rest nor peace until they rest in Christ if it should please Thee.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.