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INTRODUCTION

PAST, FUTURE AND PRESENT

What difference does the cross of Jesus Christ make to the way you live?

For many people, the answer to that question is simple: no difference at all. It's a mere fact of history, no more life-changing than the death of Socrates, or Martin Luther King, or any other innocent man. Most human beings live, work, raise their families, grow old, and finally die without being in any way influenced by the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified on a hill outside Jerusalem 2,000 years ago.

Christians, of course, answer differently. Christians hold that the crucifixion of Christ is the center of human history, because on the cross Jesus died for their sins to secure life beyond death for His followers. Christians are banking their eternal destiny on this one event. Because Jesus died, they have a certain hope of eternal life with God.

But it seems to me that many Christians are still missing something important when they think about the cross. We tend to think about the final hours of Jesus' life *only* in terms of the future, in terms of our eternal destiny. We can treat the cross like a ticket to an evening football game that we're carrying around in our pocket. We're really excited about it, we're grateful for it, but we won't need it until we get to the stadium. We can think that the cross is great, and we'll definitely need it when we die... and that's about it.

But what about those seventy (or so) years that we live before we enter into eternity? Does the death of Christ make any difference for these years, the here and now? Does it give us anything *more* than the future hope of heaven?

The answer of the writers of the New Testament is a resounding “Yes!”. For them, the cross didn’t change only the future, but also everything about the present. It’s actually a bit surprising how they keep placing sweeping teaching about the cosmic significance of Jesus’ suffering and death right next to very practical application about how we should live our lives today (have a look, for instance, at Philippians 2 v 3-8).

The cross of Christ is the reality that gives shape to the way Christians should think about every detail of our lives right now, from our marriages to our money, from our suffering to our success.

So this is a book about a past event, a single day in a single man’s life. But because that single day is the final day of Jesus’ earthly life, it’s a book that is all about the future, too. And it’s still more than that. As we look at what is often called Christ’s “Passion” through the eyes of Luke’s Gospel, we’ll encounter almost every conceivable human emotion and character quality. We’ll have much to learn from the cowardice of Peter and Pilate, and from the bravery of Joseph of Arimathea. The devotion of the women who stayed with Jesus to the very end will encourage us, just as the treachery of Judas will warn us. And ultimately, the words and actions of Jesus over the course of the hardest day of His life will model for us what it means to live faithful lives in the middle of a broken world.

In other words, this book is about the present. It’s about today, and how Christ’s final day transforms our every day. The more I read the Passion narratives in the Gospels, the

more I'm convinced that there are no wasted words, spare characters or unimportant moments. Each is there, as we'll see, to teach us. Each of the moments Luke (inspired by God's Spirit) relates to us has a purpose for our lives *today*.

The cross of Christ is all we will need, and all we will have, on the last day of this life. But wonderfully, it's also all that we need for today, and tomorrow, and every day up till that last one.

There are many wonderful books on the cross of Christ, and it won't take you long to figure out that this one is not meant to provide a definitive word on the subject. No book can—Christians will spend an eternity being amazed by what happened on that day 2,000 years ago.

But this book *is* intended to change the way you live and dream—not because of this book itself, but because of the events it points you to. At the end of each chapter, you'll find a few questions to help you think through what you've read, as well as a hymn or poem to assist you in meditating on the Bible truths you've been looking at.

If you are a new believer, I hope that this book will help you better understand and appreciate and be stirred by the cross. If you're a long-standing Christian, I'd love it if this book helped you work out more of the way that the Lord's final hours before His death impact your daily life. And if you're not yet a follower of Jesus, it's my prayer that God would use this book as a means of opening your eyes to the most wonderful news imaginable.

Whoever you are, I'm praying that Jesus' Passion will inspire your passion for Him, and that you'll be able to say with great confidence and excitement once you've finished:

To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

(Philippians 1 v 21)

CHAPTER ONE

THE CUP

J³⁹ Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. ⁴⁰ On reaching the place, he said to them, “Pray that you will not fall into temptation.” ⁴¹ He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, ⁴² “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”

⁴³ An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him.

⁴⁴ And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. ⁴⁵ When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow. ⁴⁶ “Why are you sleeping?” he asked them. “Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.”

Luke 22 v 39-46

Imagine that one day you’re hurrying along the street, with a thousand things on your mind and on your to-do list, when you see a good friend sitting on a bench some distance away. You haven’t seen them in a while, and you smile as you realize it’s them.

But as you come closer, you begin to sense that something’s wrong. The smile that you thought you saw on their face is actually a grimace. Their eyes contain tears, and their back is slumped. They seem overwhelmed by sadness and anguish.

How would you respond? I’d like to think that I would drop everything, forget my schedule, and run to my friend.

I'd want to know what was wrong. I'd want to take time to listen to them, to understand my friend's suffering.

Luke's painting of this scene on a hillside, the night before Good Friday begins, presents us with something a little bit like that scenario. We are coming across Jesus in a moment of "anguish" (v 44). Now, if you know anything about Jesus, you probably know that He was not an emotionally fragile man. He was fearless and compassionate, strong and tender. But not here. Here He seems almost broken.

How will you respond? Let's drop everything, forget the other thoughts in our heads, and listen to Him. Let's take time to understand and appreciate what is wrong; why this strongest of men is on His knees, sweating as He prays.

But first, let's set the scene.

A Man Like No Other

We're jumping into the middle (well, actually, almost the end) of a story, or in many ways a biography. So as we watch Jesus on the Mount of Olives on that dark night, it's well worth seeing how He got there.

The author of the book of Luke is a man named Luke (whoever came up with the title clearly wasn't blessed with much imagination), a physician and amateur historian who lived in the time of Jesus. As far as we know, Luke didn't know Jesus personally or witness any of the things that he records in his biography of the Lord. Instead, he tells us (1 v 1-4) that he carefully researched the events surrounding Jesus' birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven.

In the first twenty two-and-a-half chapters of his Gospel, Luke has shown us that Jesus is a man like no other; in fact, that He is the Son of God. We've seen Jesus call together

a motley band of disciples, teach the masses about the salvation He would bring, perform many healings and miracles, and predict His own death and resurrection. Then, on this particular night, as Jesus celebrates the Passover meal with His friends for the last time, He reveals that He knows that one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, has agreed to betray the Lord into the hands of His jealous rivals. The stage is set for the most difficult night of Jesus' life.

After leaving the Passover meal, Jesus goes with His disciples to the Mount of Olives (22 v 39), a quiet place He went to frequently. Matthew and Mark's accounts of Jesus' life tell us that He stops in the Garden of Gethsemane, a secluded retreat on the hillside. There He leaves them, twice instructing them that they should use the time to pray that they would not fall into temptation (v 40).

But instead of praying, they fall asleep "from sorrow" (v 45). It seems that they are simply emotionally and physically drained. At the very moment that Jesus most needed His friends' love and support and prayers, they fall asleep. And sadly, I can relate to the misplaced priorities of the disciples here. When life is overwhelming, I often find it easier to sleep than to pray.

The bustle of the meal is left far behind; even His closest friends are asleep; and whatever Jesus is about to experience, He will go through it completely alone.

Deep Anguish

Jesus goes a little way away to pray (v 41). Throughout Luke, we're told of Jesus praying to His heavenly Father. Prayer was the way that Jesus prepared for big challenges and recovered from the difficulties of His ministry. When something important was about to happen, Jesus prayed. When the crowds were pressing in on Him, Jesus would

still find time to pray. Now, Jesus knows that He has been betrayed. He knows that His arrest is not far off. So we would expect Jesus to go to His Father for comfort, strength, and renewal.

But instead of finding peace in prayer, Jesus begins to experience something terrible, so much so that an angel has to be sent to strengthen Him (v 43). Luke tells us that He is in agony, experiencing such anguish (mental? physical? spiritual? all three?) that His sweat is like blood. The picture painted for us is one of a person in total “system overload”; Jesus’ physical body and human nature can barely endure what is happening.

The Cup

So we have to ask: what could possibly cause *this* kind of agony to *this* kind of man?

We can say with certainty that Jesus is not merely caving into fear as He anticipates dying. It cannot possibly be that Jesus is a coward, undone by the certainty of His own death. After all, Jesus has been speaking about His crucifixion for some time. He’s deliberately walked towards the city where He knew it would happen. The cause of Jesus’ turmoil in the garden can’t be a straightforward fear of death. There must be something more going on.

And verse 42 reveals that there is. “Father,” Jesus prays, “if you are willing, take this cup from me.” Mark and Matthew’s Gospels tell us that Jesus cried out three separate times for relief from “this cup”. The source of Jesus’ anguish is a *cup*. What cup could possibly cause this kind of agony?

A look at a couple of Old Testament passages sheds some light on it. The prophets of Israel sometimes spoke of God’s wrath and judgment against sin as a “cup” that the wicked

were required to drink. And so the prophet Isaiah wrote to the people of Jerusalem, whose city had been sacked and who had been carried off by the Babylonian armies:

Awake, awake! Rise up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD the cup of his wrath, you who have drained to its dregs the goblet that makes men stagger. (Isaiah 51 v 17)

And in the same way, God told the prophet Jeremiah about the disaster He was sending to the nations around Israel:

This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: "Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. When they drink it, they will stagger and go mad because of the sword I will send among them." (Jeremiah 25 v 15-16)

In the Old Testament, "the cup" is symbolic. It represents the fury, anger and punishment of God. To put it simply, "the cup" is full of God's perfect and holy hatred for sin. And here on the mountainside, Jesus begins to taste what is in that cup, unmingled and undiluted by God's mercy.

The Wrath

Now, allow me to anticipate an objection at this point. Perhaps you are thinking to yourself something along the lines of: "Wrath? Really? Is that the kind of God I'm supposed to love? I expect wrath and fury from a spoiled toddler, not the Almighty God of the universe!" Maybe that thought has occurred to you; if not, you've probably heard someone else give voice to it.

And so before we go any further, it's worth taking a significant detour and addressing the issue of God's wrath.

If the Bible showed us that God's anger against sin is like the fury of a badly-behaved child, then we would have a problem. It would be hard to respect or love or trust God if He were like that. But the Bible describes God's wrath as something that is actually part of His perfection—not a suspension of it. It is an expression of His holiness and His hatred for wickedness.

In fact, God wouldn't be God if He were not willing to punish sin and injustice. If God were *not* a God of wrath, we should not respect, or love or trust Him.

I realize that might be a controversial statement for some, so let's take it out on the road for a test drive. Because if perfect wrath is part of God's holy character, then we might rightly expect it to show up in the noble character of humanity, right? The Bible teaches that humans are made in God's image, that we reflect something of His character and intelligence. And so if God is rightly wrathful, then we would expect that would show up at times when human beings are at their very best.

A friend of mine recently told me about a time in an east Asian nation where his hosts drove him into the capital city. As they entered the city, they were confronted by a long line of young girls, lined up by the side of the road. These girls had been sold into slavery as prostitutes (often by their parents), and they would spend their lives being used and abused until they were finally cast aside when they were no longer desirable. My friend described his feelings as he saw these girls: an anger, a rage in his heart that made him feel as if his chest was going to rip in two.

Was my friend's anger good? Was it right and pure? Or should he have thought about the parents who had sold these innocent girls, the men who had pimped them, and the "clients" who had abused them, with a sort of smiling,

indifferent benevolence? Should you? Of course not! Anger in the face of brutal oppression is a good and right thing.

If that goes for humans, it goes for the God who made humans, too. God's hatred for sin is *part* of His perfection. The Bible tells us so... and deep in our hearts we know it ought to be so. Those girls lined up along the roadside are just a drop in the total bucket of human evil. They represent just the evil being done in one small place on one day. But now begin to add up the totality of injustice done in all of human history (genocide, chattel slavery, racism, oppression). We simply can't have a good God who doesn't hate sin and who won't do something about it someday.

But where we really run into a problem, where we really object to God's wrath and justice, is when it comes to *us*. We may be happy with a God who punishes the rapists and the murderers, but we aren't happy with a God who punishes us. But where would you have God draw the line? How much should He tolerate from you? How much of your pride, anger, deceit, manipulation and selfishness do you think God should overlook?

The Bible tells us where God draws the line: He demands perfection. God is perfectly holy and He created us to obey Him perfectly, and He will not lie and say that your sin and my sin is not a big deal. We all deserve God's wrath.

A God who is committed to justice is good news for us as sufferers, but it is terrifying news for us as sinners. That cup of wrath fits naturally in my hands, in your hands, and in the hands of every human alive.

The First Sip

Now we're ready to wrestle with what is happening as Jesus prepares to drink that cup. Jesus Himself has never

sinned. He has never earned God's righteous hatred for His wickedness. He is the only person in human history who doesn't deserve to face the wrath of a perfect and holy God. But in this dark night on the Mount of Olives, Jesus begins tasting in His soul the contents of that awful cup. In a few hours, at the cross, He will drain it to its dregs. Why?

So that we wouldn't have to drink any of it, ever.

It's impossible to overstate the magnitude and mystery of this moment. This is an event that remains utterly unique in human history. Stop and think about it: here in the garden, the perfect, sinless, holy Son of God, whose soul recoils at the presence of sin, begins to taste what it will be like to be treated like a sinner, to face wrath like a sinner. Here the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, who has eternally enjoyed perfect unity and love with His Father, begins to feel what it will be like to be forsaken and abandoned by Him. We cannot hope to fully understand or explain these events. We can only describe them, believe them, and be led to worship by them.

For those of us who have received forgiveness through Jesus' blood, we have here on the Mount of Olives a beautiful picture of our Lord's love for us. Can you imagine what it was like for Jesus to endure the cross? If just a taste, just the anticipation of that wrath, was enough to make Jesus fall to the ground and sweat drops like blood, how much worse was His actual experience at His crucifixion the next day? Why did He do it? So that we would never need to face any of it, ever.

The Representative

And so on that night, in that place, Jesus was acting as our representative.

To grasp the significance of what Jesus is doing here, we need to rewind way back through the storyline of the Bible, to the very beginning. How did sin and death come into the world? God created Adam and Eve, the first humans, and placed them in the Garden of Eden. And in that garden they were given a choice between obedience and disobedience (Genesis 2 v 16-17). If they obeyed God's will, they would experience nothing but the joy and blessing and the peace of God for which they were created. Disobedience, on the other hand, would bring death and wrath. Adam and Eve chose sin and death, and you and I have followed in their footsteps.

Now in your mind's eye fast-forward through the millennia from the Garden of Eden to the Garden of Gethsemane. At every point in His life, Jesus has always obeyed His Father. And here in this garden He has the choice: will He obey the Father, or not? But Jesus' choice is not exactly like the choice that faced Adam. There is an important difference. For Adam, obedience to God meant that he would experience blessing and peace. For Jesus, choosing to obey God means that He will be cursed and crushed. If Jesus obeys the Father's will and goes to the cross, He will experience unimaginable horror.

Which is why the words at the end of verse 42 are some of the most awesome in the entire Bible. Take this cup from me, Jesus begs His Father: "yet not my will, but yours be done".

It's just the opposite of what Adam did. Adam said to God: "My will, not yours!" But Jesus said: "Even though it will cost me everything, let your will be done, not mine". Jesus is doing what Adam did not do. He is doing what we do not do. He is our representative, obeying as we should obey and enduring what we should endure.

Has there ever been a greater act of obedience? Has there ever been a greater act of love to God and neighbor? What an amazing Savior we have. This is why Christians have had to write songs to express the love and adoration we feel for Jesus. Sometime ordinary words don't seem like enough!

But pausing to look at Jesus on the mountainside doesn't just overflow in our songs, but in our lives. Jesus' highest priority was the will of His heavenly Father, even when it was costly and dangerous. And Jesus tells His followers to pray to their heavenly Father: "Your will be done" (Matthew 6 v 10). We need to realize what we're doing when we say that line in the "Lord's Prayer". We need to realize that obedience to God's will may often be difficult and painful. It's not enough to say those words; we must be willing to live them. Jesus shows us what that means; it means suffering the loss of comfort, convenience, reputation, even our lives.

More than an Example

When we think about what Jesus endured that night for us, we see a wonderful (and challenging) example of how we ought to live. We see that we should pray when we are facing difficulties. We see that we should obey even when we are facing a great cost. As we see Jesus waking up His disciples and encouraging them to pray instead of blasting them for failing to keep Him company, we see that we need to be patient with those who let us down.

Jesus is a fantastic example for us, in fact the best example ever. But if that's all we take away from this passage, we have completely missed the point—because Jesus doesn't kneel there in that garden primarily as your example. If you walk away from these verses thinking that you just need to try harder so that you live like Jesus, you will be absolutely crushed. You cannot do it.

The point of these events is not for you and me to look at Jesus' bravery and His forgiveness and His trust and His sacrifice and be inspired to be a bit more like Him. The point is that you and I should realize that we're *not* like Jesus, that we don't love and forgive and trust and obey the way that we should. We don't just need an inspiring example; we need a saving substitute. We need someone who will take our punishment, and who will give us His perfection. We need someone who will die our death and give us life. We need a Savior. We don't need Jesus to do things better than us, to learn from; we need Jesus to do it for us, to be saved by.

On the Mount of Olives, we see Jesus, under the most extreme circumstances imaginable, tasting the cup of God's wrath. And it staggers Him. It astonishes Him. It knocks Him to the ground. But it doesn't shake His love for you. Not an ounce. If you're a Christian, you can look at Jesus contemplating the cup of hell, surrounded by disciples who are failing Him, and you can see Him saying to His Father: *I will take it for them.*

You are Loved

And so if you're a Christian, you can look at Jesus kneeling in anguish and know beyond all doubt that God loves you. What is going to happen, what is going to change that would make Jesus stop loving you? If the fury of God's holy wrath doesn't do it, what will? If God the Father loved you enough that He would send the Son that He loved to endure this kind of suffering for you, what will shake His love for you? "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8 v 32).

You may not consider yourself particularly loveable. You

may have spent most of your life looking for something or someone to make you feel loved. You may have been burned or betrayed by someone who said “I love you” but proved to mean “I love me”. You may have settled for receiving a half-hearted love which is less than you’d dreamed of, but the best you think you’ll find. You may have been told that you must learn to love yourself, but deep down that’s proving impossible because you can’t ignore the un-lovely things that you know about yourself. You may have been laboring under the feeling that you need to get good enough to earn God’s love.

Well, look at Jesus on the Mount of Olives, saying to the Father: *I will take the cup*. He took it for you. He loved you so much that He did that for you. You are loved, by the only One in the universe whose love matters eternally. He loves you!

For Reflection:

- *God feels right anger at injustice and sin. How does your heart reflect His? How could it do so more?*
- *Are there areas of your life where you’re doing what’s easy and disobeying God instead of what’s costly in obedience to Him? How does Jesus’ example inspire you to change?*
- *When and why do you feel unworthy of love? How will you remind yourself of Jesus’ unshakeable love at those moments?*

*Consider Christ, that He could trust His Father
In the Garden of Gethsemane.
Though full of dread, and fearful of the anguish
He drank the cup that was reserved for me.*

*My Lord and God, you are so rich in mercy,
mere words alone are not sufficient thanks.
So take my life, transform, renew and change me
That I might be a living sacrifice.*

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