

**Which Cup did He Drink? How was He Forsaken?
Our Atonement and the Last Prayers of Jesus (Matt 26:39; 27:46).**

“My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.” “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 26:39; 27:46). This paper argues that the unwanted cup represents suffering caused by humans, not by God; and that Jesus was forsaken by God just as the composer of Psalm 22 and the troubled Israelites who subsequently prayed Psalm 22.

These are the strongest prayers of lament in the NT, and from Jesus himself. By interpreting these prayers in the light of God’s wrath against sin and God’s punishment of sin, we have reduced their usefulness for distressed believers. They no longer pertain, or if so only distantly, to believers making dreaded choices (let this cup pass from me) and enduring painful trials (my God, why have you forsaken me).

Our reasoning says that if God’s wrath against human sin is just, and it is, then we who were by nature children of wrath will be saved only if that wrath falls on another. But I urge that my audience allow Scripture to present a different solution, a different rescue from righteous wrath. Consider how the Scriptures read without this logic; consider death to be the penalty, not wrath.

Jesus indeed died in our place, and was the offering that turned aside God’s wrath from his people. But the Scriptures present the *sacrificial death* of the substitute as the means of atonement, not God’s *wrathful punishment* of the substitute. The Scriptures never indicate that God poured out his wrath on Jesus, or punished Jesus, or rejected Jesus, beyond simply letting the execution carry on. That must govern how we explain these prayers.

I defend this in six parts: 1, the Burnt Offering; 2, the Servant’s Punishment in Isa 53; 3, Jesus Predicts his Great Suffering; 4, Prayer one: Let this Cup Pass; 5, Prayer two: Why have you Forsaken Me; and 6, God’s Wrath and Christ’s Death in Romans 5.

1, The Burnt Offering - I take it as given that sacrifice provides a central biblical explanation of Jesus’s death. Some NT images are different, like ransom, or a shepherd laying down his life for his sheep; nevertheless sacrifice provides the basic model.

In none of the OT sacrifices do we read that God poured out his wrath on the doomed animal, or that God punished the animal for the people’s sins, or that God rejected or turned his face away from the animal. Rather, Moses depicts God as attentive, welcoming, and pleased.

Some considered the *sin offering* to be the principle atoning offering of Israel, rather than the *burnt offering*, but OT scholarship has corrected this. Wenham says, “the *burnt offering* was the principle atoning sacrifice in ancient Israel. It was the sacrifice that reconciled the sinner with his creator ... In contrast the [*sin/purification*] *offering* was a less important rite ... It was designed to cope with a subsidiary problem created by human sin—pollution and defilement” (95; so also Baruch Levine and Jacob Milgrom on Leviticus, and conservative commentaries since Wenham).

The burnt offering is the basic offering. Leviticus takes the burnt offering up first, giving it the prominent place. And the burnt offering occurs much more often in levitical and narrative contexts than any other offering. It was the only offering made every morning and every evening, with the fire never going out; and that is apart from many other uses.

It first appears in Genesis 8: *Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humans, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done."* Gen 8:20-21.

God changed his posture toward evil people. God became benevolent because he smelled the pleasing odor of the burnt offering. The offering pleased him and the Divine heart softened toward sinful people, and we overhear God vowing to himself never to judge this way again.

In Leviticus we find the same emphasis. *He shall bring [the animal] to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord. ⁴ He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him.* (Lev 1:3-4). That is, God accepts the offering and also accepts the worshiper, and three times we read that the burnt offering produces an aroma pleasing to the Lord (Lev 1:9, 13, 17), an aroma that never stopped rising in the presence of the Lord, perpetually softening.

Nothing in these portrayals suggests God's just anger or just punishment of the animal, or that God rejected the animal and turned his face away because it carried human sin. God accepted the burnt offering and it pleased him, and this turned his heart from judgement to kindness.

2, The Servant's Punishment in Isaiah 53

Isaiah 53 is Isaiah's fourth servant song. The third song, in Isaiah 50, prepares us for the servant's suffering, and also explains God's involvement. The servant endured human punishment because God told him to submit to humans.

The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me ... I have set my face like a flint. (50:5-7).

That is, in the third song, God instructs the servant to submit to human mistreatment, and God helps and vindicates the servant. The troubles themselves come only through humans.

Now to the fourth song: Isa 53:3 shows how people viewed the servant: *"He was despised and rejected by men, ... and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not."* Then the watchers express their later realization (v4a): *"Sure he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.* Now the watchers elaborate on their earlier mistake (v4b): *"yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted."*

“Esteemed” in 53:4 indicates their former view. They esteemed (reckoned, considered) that his troubles were God’s judgment on him for his own sins. This shows what they meant by “we esteemed him not” in 53:3 . What they actually saw was the servant smitten and afflicted.

To use the language of the third song, they saw his back struck, his beard pulled, and his face disgraced by spitting. With typical Jewish retribution theology, they assumed from these that he was chastised by God. My paraphrase: “from what we saw, before we knew better, we concluded that God was punishing him for his own sins.”

Isaiah gives us no reason to take the troubles of the servant beyond what the watchers can see and hear, and this is how the Isaiah commentators all take it. The servant died at the hands of unjust people, by God’s choice, and for the iniquities of others, this also by God’s doing. Is God in any way adding punishment to the human mistreatment? Nothing in Isaiah 53 leads us to that.

3, Jesus Predicts His Great Suffering – I will cite Jesus’ four death predictions in Matthew, add a fifth comment from the Lord, and invite you to ask if Jesus expected to suffer from humans, or from God. I take these sayings to be the central Scripture witness to what Jesus suffered.

(1) “*Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*” (2) “*Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.”*

(3) “*The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised.*” (4) “*The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised” (Mt 16:21; 17:12; 22-23; 20:18-19).*

A fifth saying pertains to our discussion: the cup of Jesus, James, and John. *Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” He said to them, “You will drink my cup”* (Mt 20:22–23).

Jesus expected “great suffering,” and that entirely at human hands. Nothing hints that Jesus anticipated his Father’s wrath or punishment, curse or rejection; every prediction indicates that Jesus expected human rejection and brutality.

If his greatest suffering would be the cup of God’s wrath and God’s rejection, we have two options. Either God concealed this greater suffering from Jesus, or God revealed it to Jesus, but Jesus concealed this greater suffering from his disciples. Let us consider these two possibilities.

Jesus’ death predictions reveal all the important aspects of the great suffering that the Gospels later record. He also knows the reason: he will give his life as a ransom for many, he will be another Passover lamb, and his covenant blood will enable forgiveness of sins. After revealing all this to the Son, is it conceivable that the Son will also suffer wrath from the Father, and this righteous punishment is the ultimate basis for atonement, but that the Father hid this from the

Son? Is it possible that this punishment would be an essential part of atonement, but Jesus himself does not understand atonement well enough to expect it? These strain credulity.

That Jesus knew all this but concealed it from the disciples faces the same kind of difficulties. He tells them plainly what he will suffer, and why. His disciples will soon be sent to proclaim his death and resurrection to the world. They need to know. Would he hide this greater suffering from the disciples, especially if human salvation depended on it? And not indicate that there was more explanation coming? None of this is credible. The plain sense of the Gospels is that Jesus knew what he would suffer, and why, and no Scripture suggests we should revise this. The Gospels know nothing of God's punishing wrath on Jesus, or his estrangement from Jesus. We have no higher authority on the nature of Christ's great suffering than the consistent witness of his own words. These five sayings are the core of my argument.

4, Prayer One: Let this Cup Pass – Scholars list the OT texts in which “cup” refers to God's wrathful judgement on wicked people, implying that dying Jesus asks to escape God's wrathful judgement on the world's sin. Let us examine this.

The OT usually uses “cup” as a metaphor for judgement, but that is not the only way. It is a flexible metaphor; the best known positive example appears in Ps 23:5, “my cup overflows,” where the cup signifies God's bountiful care. See also Psalm 16:5, “the LORD is my portion and my cup,” where the cup represents YHWH himself. The context decides which cup.

In Matthew 20 (and Mark 10), Jesus has already described the cup he would drink. *Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?* ... *He said to them, “You will drink my cup.”*

The cup Jesus anticipates is inescapably the same cup that he knows James and John would drink, the cup of suffering for the gospel. James was beheaded (Acts 12) and John exiled (Revelation 1), assuming that is the same “John.” James and John did not drink the wrathful judgment of God on a sinful world, but they did suffer for the gospel from its human enemies, as Jesus was about to suffer for the gospel from its human enemies.

Nothing in the rest of Matthew (or Mark, Luke, or John) reports that dying Jesus endured the wrathful punishment of God; everything in the Gospels says that by God's will Jesus endured human rejection and fatal brutality. Thus Jesus prays, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me,” fearing what any child of God would fear, and as any child of God would fear, when entering a terrible ordeal.

5, Prayer Two: Why have You Forsaken Me? Jesus quoted the opening line of Psalm 22. Whenever the NT quotes the OT, the default position should be that the speaker means the words as they would normally be taken in their OT context. That works well here.

In Psalm 22, God had not actually forsaken the psalmist, and no Psalms commentator thinks God had forsaken the psalmist, any more than God had forsaken suffering Job, or bitter Naomi, or James who was beheaded, or John who was exiled. But they may have experienced God as forsaking them, because God did not rescue or help them.

The lament of Psalm 22 is not that God was judging the psalmist, but rather that humans were doing to the psalmist whatever they wanted, and God would not help. Jesus prayed the first line of Psalm 22: our starting position should be that Jesus was forsaken in the same way as the composer of Psalm 22 was forsaken, that is, God did not intervene. Jesus despaired for the same reasons as Psalm 22 records, that is, God did not help his faithful one who was suffering and dying at the hands of a mob.

The next phrase of Ps 22:1 confirms this: *why [are you] so far from saving me?* That is how the psalmist was forsaken: he was in trouble, and God did not save him. *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why so far from saving me?*

Jesus knew he must die, that is a given, but in his final hours he expected some relief from God, some strengthening or comfort from God, some encouragement or help, some sign or vindication, but he perceived no response from God. He experienced God's failure to act, and prayed that way.

Leon Morris, in his Matthew commentary, believes it is nearly blasphemous to say that Jesus thought he was forsaken by God, but we know better. It does not occur to Leon Morris that Jesus might mean "forsaken" exactly as the composer of Psalm 22 meant it, and also countless Jews, who in worship prayed Psalm 22: suffering at the hands of human enemies without relief from God. Everything in the Gospels supports this default position, as do Isaiah's third and fourth servant songs: that Jesus meant the words as Psalm 22 uses them.

6, God Wrath and Christ's Death in Romans 5 - I will cite Romans 5:6–10, and invite you to notice the full picture of relational problems with God included in this paragraph: we were *sinner*s, we need to be *saved* from God's *wrath*, we were *enemies* but are now *reconciled* to God. Paul makes the *death* of Christ the saving solution.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.⁷ Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us.⁹ Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood [= "sacrificial death"], will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.¹⁰ For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life (Rom 5:6–10).

What Christ needed to do was die sacrificially, six times in these five verses. This *death* saves us from the wrath of God. By this *death*, God reconciles his sinful enemies to himself. Again, nothing requires or implies God's punishing wrath against Christ, or Christ being temporarily forsaken or abandoned. Paul's words agree nicely with what we saw in Matthew, that for our atonement to take place, Christ needed to die at human hands, and this was enough.

Interpreters sometimes appeal to two other lines in Paul to support God's punishment and rejection of Christ: (Gal 3:13) *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree;"* and (2 Cor 5:21) *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin.*

These lines *could* fit with God's punishment and rejection of Christ, if we knew these to be the case from other Scripture. But the words themselves neither state nor require this, and God's punishment and rejection of Christ are not in either context. We may not use a doubtful reading of one Scripture to support the doubtful reading of another Scripture. Paul's clear statements support what we saw elsewhere.

Summary – The Scriptures present the sacrificial death of the substitute as the means of atonement, not God's wrathful punishment of the substitute. The penalty was death. The Scriptures never indicate that God poured out his wrath on Jesus, or punished Jesus, or rejected Jesus, beyond simply letting the execution carry on.

Perhaps we have confused God's *justice* with his *wrath*. We firstly conclude that God's punishing wrath on the wicked is *just*, and the Scripture supports this first conclusion. We then have concluded that his *justice* is *not satisfied without wrath*. The Scriptures do not support this second conclusion. The Scriptures indicate that the substitute's *death* satisfies God's *justice*. A *just atonement* requires *death*, not *wrath*. Scripture everywhere exalts the saving power of Christ's *death* in our place.

Recovering the Passion Prayers – *Jesus fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"*

Jesus models how to turn our distress into prayer. These prayers should be given back to believers making dreaded choices and believers enduring painful trials without relief.

Jews and early Christians had hero martyr stories, people who faced death with unwavering boldness and strong testimony, to their last breath. Jesus did not die like that, and Mark and Matthew refuse to shape him as a hero, except that he faithfully obeyed.

Jesus was terrified at the beginning, filled with dread, knowing what the day would bring. And at the end he despaired, for in Jesus's experience, God had left him alone at the worst time possible. In that despair he died. But on the third day, God raised his obedient Servant from the dead, and gave him all authority in heaven and on earth. He is a hero of a greater kind, more like us than we thought. *He was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God* (2 Cor 13:4).

Let us strip these prayers of unnecessary salvation themes. The Gospels give these prayers to believers in distress, and there these prayers should stay. Easter preaching must make this clear.