

Prov Sem Chapel, March 2016; KCC Good Friday 2-Apr-2021

Which Cup? How Forsaken? The Final Prayers of Jesus
(Matt 26:39; 27:46)

In the Garden of Gethsemane, just before he was arrested, Jesus prayed this: “Father, if possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not my will but yours be done.” On the cross the next day, just before he died, Jesus prayed this: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

I was taught that these prayers showed us Jesus’ experience of being our Saviour. The cup Jesus dreaded was not normal human fear of horrible execution. It was the cup of God’s judgement and wrath against sin, which Jesus drank because he died as our Saviour.

So also with the cry of forsakenness. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? I was taught, usually on Good Friday, that this was not what any child of God would experience when God does not rescue from terrible pain. No, this was the forsakenness of the Saviour, unique to the Saviour, forsaken by God because he was carrying the world’s sin. God rejected Jesus because God could not face our sin that Jesus was carrying.

I want to say as strongly as possible that none of our Four Gospels gives any support at all for the Saviour interpretation of these prayers, the interpretation which I have just described. Nor does any other Scripture. These are the prayers of God’s obedient servant in trouble.

Jesus indeed dies as our Saviour. He gives his life a ransom for many. His blood of the covenant is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. There is no doubt that he died for our sins. He died in our place, as our substitute. We should have been mocked and flogged and crucified, but he endured that in our place. That’s true.

But the Gospels do not know anything about God being angry at Jesus, or pouring out wrath on Jesus because of human sin. Nor do the Gospels know anything about the Father forsaking Jesus, or turning his back on him, because of our sin. We will begin the story in Isaiah.

Isaiah’s Obedient Servant – Isa 50:4-9

Isaiah describes Christ here as a Servant, God’s faithful Servant. In Isaiah’s prophecy, Christ speaks these words. Prophetically, listen to Christ talking to us.

*The Sovereign Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue,
to know the word that sustains the weary.
He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen, like one being instructed.
The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears; I have not been rebellious, I have not turned away.
I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.
Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced.
Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.
He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other!
Who is my accuser? Let him confront me! It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me.*

There are three actors in this story, the Sovereign Lord, the Obedient Servant, and the Servant's enemies. The Sovereign Lord instructs the Servant. He wakens the Servant's ear, opens his ears, and instructs him. That's the Sovereign Lord.

The Servant obeys. The Servant does not rebel against the Sovereign Lord, does not turn away from what he is told to do. What is he told to do? Offer his back to the beaters, offer his cheeks to the beard pullers, offer his face to the mockers and the spitters, his enemies.

The Servant sets his face like a flint, it takes great determination and resolve to go through with this. He trusts the Sovereign Lord, and the Sovereign Lord will make sure that the Servant does not end in shame or disgrace. Afterward, the Servant will stand face to face against anyone.

Why? "Because the Sovereign Lord helps me." Twice he says that. "The Sovereign Lord helps me," and that's why the Servant goes through with this. He goes through all the suffering and humiliation because he knows the Sovereign Lord is helping him. Isaiah here predicts our Lord's death. This is what happened on the original Good Friday, and we can see that right away.

There is something here for all of us. The Scriptures use Christ as a model. Christ showed us how to go through defeating circumstances. How do servants of God go through terrible defeating circumstances? How do followers of Christ go through painful circumstances that leave us naked and defeated and empty? The answer is, how did Christ do this?

I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near... It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me.

Matthew and Mark and Luke all emphasize the humiliation of Jesus on his last day much more than the physical pain. They tell us how Jesus was mocked, humiliated, disgraced, defeated, and shamed. *Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near... It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me.*

God sometimes leads us into humiliating situations. Jesus sets his face like a flint, Luke quotes that line, Jesus sets his face like flint, this takes courage and determination. He knows that the mocking and spitting is not the end of his story, because the Sovereign Lord helps him, and the Sovereign Lord is near. Can you see yourself go through humiliating defeat in that way?

The Lord's first death prediction in Matthew – 16:21

Matthew 16:21 - *Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.*

He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things. He must go? What does that mean? It means that God has given Jesus clear instructions, including the very prophecy in Isaiah 50 that we just read. The Father has told the Son what to do. He must go through this.

He must suffer many things. When Jesus died in Jerusalem, he suffered a great deal. Who would cause this suffering? *He must ... suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law.* He suffered many things at the hands of his human enemies.

His Father led him into the middle of his human enemies. That's bad enough, but Jesus knows of no other suffering. The Father did not punish Jesus directly in any way at all, the Father led him to his human enemies. And afterward his Father raised him, and gave him authority and glory.

You and me as well. "*Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us*" (Rm 8:18).

The Lord's Second Death Prediction in Matthew – 17:12

We will just read these two death predictions, because these two use the word "suffer," and I want to make clear that humans, not God, caused the suffering of Jesus.

*But I tell you, Elijah has come [that is, John the Baptist], and **they** did not recognize him, but **they** have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at **their** hands.*

John the Baptist suffered at the hands of human enemies, and the Son of Man, in the same way, will suffer at their hands. The human enemies of God that caused John's suffering will also cause our Lord's suffering.

If Jesus' greatest distress would be from God, not humans, why did Jesus give no hint of that to followers? Jesus that feared what people would do, not what God would do. The cup he had to drink was human hostility and human defeat and disgrace.

The Cup of Jesus, James, and John – 20:22-23

James and John, sons of Zebedee, asked to sit at Jesus' right and left in his kingdom. "*You don't know what you are asking,*" Jesus said to them. "*Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?*" "*We can,*" they answered. Jesus said to them, "*You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant.*"

Jesus, James, and John, will all drink the same cup. Mark is even more emphatic: *Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink, and be baptized, with the baptism, I am baptized with.*

You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with. 'James and John, you will have the same experience I'm going to have. John the Baptist has already had it, and I will have that experience soon, and then you will have it too.'

The cup here is human hostility against the gospel of God. James of Zebedee was beheaded by king Herod, we read in Acts 12, the first of the Eleven to die. John of Zebedee wrote Revelation, John was exiled on Patmos. James and John did not drink the cup of God's wrath against sin, or his abandonment.

James and John drank the cup of persecution, the cup of violent human hostility against the gospel. Jesus left no doubt that his cup and theirs were the same. *You will drink the cup I drink.*

Take this Cup from Me – 26:39 - 42

“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”

How did Jesus get through this? He prayed. He prayed the Lord’s Prayer, like always – not my will, Father, but your will be done. He told the disciples to pray, and then he prayed again.

Again, do not make this cup any direct terror from God. Jesus was clear, the suffering he dreads will come from human enemies, he’s been clear that James and John will drink this same cup that he hopes he can avoid.

Jesus had set his face like a flint, but here near the end, he had trouble with that. He had big trouble staying on course, it was very hard to stay with the Father on this. Hebrews tells us that Jesus prayed with loud cries and tears. Jesus was in great distress.

People, what’s *your* cup? What has God given *you* to drink that you would do almost anything to avoid, short of actually abandoning the Lord? Your cup defeats you, it humiliates you, people mock you, they shake their heads about you, it causes great suffering. You are being baptized in something that exhausts and discourages you, and frightens you.

So did your Lord, and he is with you every day, has never left you or forsaken you.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” – 27:46

Jesus prayed from the Psalms, he died praying the Psalms. I would like to die praying the Psalms. Jesus here prays the first line of Psalm 22, a David psalm. We should assume Jesus meant these words just as David in Psalm 22 meant them.

Was David forsaken because he carried the world’s sin? No. Did God turn his back on David because God could not face his sin? No. No one thinks that. So what was David’s problem? The problem was that David was in distress, and God was not helping. *Why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me?*

For a thousand years, from David to Jesus, faithful Israelites prayed and chanted and sang Psalm 22 to God, at the temple, in their sacred assemblies, in their synagogues. Jesus joined in this. The cup Jesus drank was humiliation and pain, and his forsakenness was God’s failure to help in Jesus’ suffering.

Jesus knew he had to die, but he longed for some relief from God, some sign or some evidence that God was with him and on his side, some encouragement, some help. In our Lord's experience, he was getting nothing. In Mt and Mk, these are the last words of Jesus.

The Jews had hero martyr stories, stories of devout Jews who were tormented and executed, but were bold and confident to the end, their faith in God unshaken by their sufferings. 2 Maccabees 7 has such a story. But in Matthew and Mark, Jesus is nothing like that. Jesus died discouraged and despairing, because it seemed that God was not with him.

That's what it felt like to be the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, that's what it was like to give his life a ransom for many. 2 Cor 13 says he was crucified in weakness. People just saw weakness. But he lives by God's power, he was raised, and has all authority in heaven and on earth.

In the middle of drinking *our* cup, and experiencing *our* baptism, God seems far away, doesn't he. All the wonderful promises in Scripture can turn into dust in a moment, they are just babbling, everything in our being says it cannot be true that God my Helper is with me. That is certainly my experience. Folks, Jesus is in the club. He had no assurance of God's presence.

So he prayed. Here is how Ps 22 begins: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.*

Jesus had lost his confidence in God, but he did not stop praying. God gave prayers to those of us who have lost confidence that he is with us and helping us. When David prayed, "My God, why have you forsaken me," had God actually left him? Not for a moment. Was God still David's Shepherd? Certainly.

When Christ said those words, was it any different? Certainly not. His Father was certainly with him and helping him. Did it seem like that to our Lord? No, not at all.

When you and I pray, *My God, why have you forsaken me*, is it any different? No, he is still with us and helping us. Then why does God give us prayers like that? Because as far as God is concerned, the worst thing we can do is separate our troubles from God. The worst thing is to say: this is just bad luck, it's just this dark world, it's just my own weakness, just evil people.

No, says God, do not do that. Do not separate these events from me. Don't stop praying. To pray, "My God, why have you forsaken me" shows strong faith, a refusal to separate our troubles from our God. David in Ps 22 keeps praying: "*My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer; by night, but I find no rest*" (22:2).

So, people, what is your cup? What is your baptism? In Luke 12 Jesus said, "*I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is completed.*" We would like our cup to be removed. With God it is possible, so why not? Sounds like Jesus. We would like our baptism to be over. Sounds like Jesus. We are defeated and bullied and humiliated by too many things. Sounds like Jesus. We can't see that God is with us and helping us. Sounds like Jesus.

Here again is the big picture, from Isaiah 50.

*The Sovereign Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue ...
He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen, like one being instructed.
The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears; I have not been rebellious, I have not turned away.
I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.
Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced.
Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.
He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other!
Who is my accuser? Let him confront me! It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me.*

Amen.

PRAYER: Sovereign Lord, we want to follow Jesus. We also have cups to drink that we want you to remove, and we know you could. We endure baptisms that we wish were done. Sovereign Lord, give us well-instructed tongues. Wake us morning by morning, waken our ears to listen to you, like someone being instructed. Sovereign Lord, Father in heaven, open our ears to you. Help us not to be rebellious, or to turn away. Just as our Lord did, my we offer our backs, our cheeks and faces to whatever you have ordained.

Father, we know that you help us, therefore we will not end in disgrace. Help us set our faces like flints to carry on. Thank you for this confidence, that at the end we will not be shamed. You are the one who will restore and honour us, and you are always near to us. We will come through this all with glory and honour, because you, Father, the Sovereign Lord, are always near us and helping us. Amen.

BENEDICTION: *Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*