

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Palm Sunday		Pastor/Teacher
Text:	Matthew 26:36-46; Luke 22:39-46		Gary L. W. Johnson
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CHRIST IN A STATE OF FEAR

When we read the account of Christ in the upper room we see our Lord as a picture of poise and calm – how solemn He is in announcing the inauguration of the Lord’s Supper – how majestic He is in offering up His high priestly prayer in John 17 – and how moving is the account of His leading the disciples in singing a hymn as they leave for the Mount of Olives (Matthew 26:30). But then we read of *Gethsemane* – the transition is so abrupt – so sharp is the contrast that it takes us by surprise. “In the room of the Passover we saw Christ in His exalted strength and in the beauty of the harmony of His life. How calm His voice was when He spoke to Judas, when He took the bread, when He sang the hymn; how quiet His voice, whispering when they asked that He whisper, loud at other moments, engaging in long discourses, even, when that was His pleasure.”¹ Why this fearful restlessness? Our Lord had visited this place frequently (John 18:2) – why the sudden turbulence in His soul? The dark shadows of the garden are foreboding on this visit. Another contrast that becomes painfully obvious is how Christ is depicted with His disciples. In the upper room Christ is the one who gives to His disciples. He is exalted in their midst. He performs His work for them. But in the garden of Gethsemane we see something different – He seeks their company, He earnestly desires their companionship be it for one brief hour. What unseen force smote Jesus down from that poised assurance in the upper room into this profound misery and state of gloom? “This whole story of Gethsemane reveals the profound change that had come over Jesus. No longer was He the calm Shepherd who confidently led His flock. Instead, He now sought His disciples’ companionship for strength against the anguish that filled Him.”² Christ’s sorrows have their own peculiar origins and nature. Comparative studies, i.e., how Socrates faced death compared to how Jesus confronted His impending death, are very superficial. The differences between the two are enormous. John Flavel, one of the great Puritan writers, highlights Jesus as our great high priest as displayed in Gethsemane: “We have a high priest that is touched with the feeling of our infirmities, who has the compassions of God, of man, of a father, of all relations: Ps. 103:13, 14, *He knows our frame*, of what a frail and infirm composition it is; he knows it by experience, and learned compassionateness thereby. And in that he is touched with the compassionate sense of our weaknesses, he will not rigorously exact what through infirmity we cannot reach. He will not be severe for failings, such as are the issue of our infirmities. He has a tender sense of our weaknesses, pities us under them; and such a compassionate tenderness excludes severity, leaves no occasion to fear it. We have a pregnant instance hereof in the days of his flesh, Mat. 26:37-41. His soul was under great affliction; he desires his disciples to watch with him a little while; they, instead thereof, fall asleep. He might have resented this heinously, that they would not attend him watchfully for one hour, for so little a while, and that too when he was in so great extremity, when his soul was so exceeding sorrowful even unto death. They could not but condemn themselves for them; but he, instead of condemning them, or making any severe or sharp reflection upon them for it, finds out an excuse for them, *The spirit is willing*. He takes gracious notice of a willingness within, when no such thing appears without, when it was quite overpowered with weakness, and gives the weakness itself a merciful allowance.”³

- I. **JESUS' ANGUISH.** In Mark 14:33-34, the evangelist makes use of the word *ekthambeisthai* -- which implies a sudden and horrifying alarm at a terrible object.⁴ Thomas Goodwin captures the thought when he wrote, "It signifies *to be in horror*."⁵ Warfield comments that our Lord experienced a distress "which hems in on every side, from which there is therefore no escape; or rather (for the qualification imports that this hemming – in distress is mortally acute is an anguish of a sort that no issue but death can be thought of) which presses in and besets from every aside and therefore leaves no place for defence."⁶ Calvin adds, "Where did that grief and trouble and fright come from, if He did not see in death something more sad and fearful than the separation of soul and body? Certainly He endured death not only to move from earth to heaven, but rather to take on the curse that we had fallen under and relieve us of it. It was not simple horror of death, the passing away from the world, but the sight of the dread tribunal of God that came to Him, the judge Himself armed with vengeance beyond understanding. Our sin, whose burden was laid on Him, weighed on Him with their vast mass. No wonder if death's fearful abyss tormented Him grievously, with fear and anguish."⁷
- II. **JESUS ANGUISH UNIQUE.** Christ's sorrows are *different*, not only in their origin, but also in respect to their distinctive nature.
- A. **Christ's task differs from that of any other human being. His task is to suffer the penalty sin deserves.** No one else has ever entered into this kind of experience this side of Hell.
- B. **Christ is fully human. He is very different from any other human being.** He is the sinless one. The intensity of His sorrows is directly related to Him bearing sin as the sinless Savior. Ezekiel Hopkins (1633-1689) writes: "To give the highest instance that can be of the dreadfulness of death, we find, *that even our Lord Jesus Christ himself*, in whom there were no disordered passions, no sinful fears, none of those weaknesses and follies which in us do too often serve only to increase and enhance the dreadfulness of death; yet even he *loathes and nauseates to drink of that cup*; and prays, with all fervency and importunity that it might pass from him: Matt. 26:39: *Oh my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me*. And nothing, but his Father's will, was of power enough to reconcile him to it; nevertheless, *not as I will, but as thou wilt*. Certainly, that must needs be a very direful composition, which should make him, who was God as well as man, so averse from taking it: that must needs be a very formidable enemy, which should make him loth to conflict, though he were sure to conquer it; and not only restore life to himself, but to all the world. Indeed that, which made this cup so exceeding bitter to our Lord Christ, was the wrath of God, and the curse of the law, that were tempered in it; but, yet, the very vehicle of these, death itself, and the separation of his body and soul, was in itself very unpleasant and irksome, even unto him whose person was divine and whose nature was innocent. And, therefore, it must needs be, that death hath in it a great deal of dread and terror."⁸
- C. **The way which death takes the life of the Lord Jesus is also very different for Him than for other human beings.** Our Lord declared in John 10:17, 18, "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again."
- D. **People confront only an individual death struggle; Christ, however, is not dying only as a man, but as the man, the last Adam.** Jesus faced death in full awareness that He is acting as the Federal head of His people. J. C. Ryle pointed out, "The weight that pressed down on our Lord's soul, was not the fear of death, and its pains. Thousands have endured the most agonizing suffering of body, and died without a groan, and so, no doubt, might our Lord. But the real weight that bowed down the heart of Jesus, was the weight of the sin of the world, which seems to have pressed down upon Him with peculiar force. It was the burden of our guilt imputed to Him, which was now laid on Him, as on the head of the scapegoat.

How great that burden must have been, no heart of man can conceive. It is known only to God.”⁹

- E. *Jesus saw the horrible reality of death more clearly than anyone who has ever lived.* Death did not, as in the case of every other person, overtake Christ. “We are all too ready,” said Murray, “to overlook the stupendous character of death as undertaken and undergone by our Lord. Death is abnormal, the wages of sin, and the contradiction of what Jesus was as holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners. In and of itself death cannot be contemplated except with horror, dread, and recoil. It was an undertaking, a commitment assumed, an act to be effected by Himself, the exodus that He was to accomplish at Jerusalem (c.f. Luke 9:31). In the event he poured out His soul unto death, He laid down His life, He dismissed His spirit, He rent asunder the bond uniting the constituents of His human nature. He wrought what was in reality the contradiction of what He was as spotlessly human.”¹⁰

CONCLUSION: Isaiah 53:3 our Lord is identified as a man of sorrows. Warfield wrote, “In these supreme moments our Lord sounded the ultimate depths of human anguish, and vindicated on the score of the intensity of His mental suffering the right to the title Man of Sorrows. The scope of these sufferings was also very broad, embracing that whole series of painful emotions which runs from a consternation that is appalled dismay, throughout a despondency which is almost despair, to a sense of will-nigh complete desolation. In the presence of this mental anguish the physical tortures of the crucifixion retire into the background, and we may well believe that our Lord, though He died on the cross, yet died not of the cross, but, as we commonly say, of a broken heart, that is to say, of the strain of His mental suffering. The sensitiveness of His soul to affectional movements, and the depths of feeling which flowed through His being, are thus thrown up into a very clear light. And yet, it is noticeable that while they tore His heart and perhaps, in the end, broke the bonds which bound His fluttering spirit to its tenements of clay, they never took the helm of life or overthrew either the judgment of His calm understanding or the completeness of His perfect trust in His Father. If He cried out in His agony for deliverance, it was always the cry of a child to a Father Whom He trusted with all and always, and with the explicit condition, howbeit, not what I will but Thou wilt. If the sense of desolation invades His soul, yet He confidingly commends His departing spirit into His Father’s hands. (Luke 23:46).”¹²

ENDNOTES

¹ K. Schilder, *Christ In His Sufferings* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 289.

² H. N. Ridderbos, *Matthew: Bible Student Commentary* (Zondervan, 1987), p. 488.

³ *The Works of John Flavel* I (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1968), p. 270.

⁴ *Thauma* means “dread.” When the compound *ekthambeo* is found, the meaning is intensified, “to be terrified” cf. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* II, ed. C. Brown (Zondervan, 1976), p. 621. Matthew 26:37 uses the word *adēmonein*, which is trans. “sore troubled” in the KJV. The NIV has “overwhelmed with sorrow.” The word, as J. B. Lightfoot notes, “describes the confused, restless, half-distracted state which is produced by physical derangement, or by mental distress, as grief, shame, disappointment, etc.” *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians* (rpt. Zondervan, 1975), p. 123.

⁵ *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* V (rpt. Tanski, 1996), p. 275.

⁶ B. B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (rpt. P & R, 1950), p. 131.

⁷ *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries* III (Eerdmans, 1975), p. 148.

⁸ *The Works of Ezekiel Hopkins* III (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), p. 245.

⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* I (rpt. Baker, 1979), p. 488.

¹⁰ *Collected Works of John Murray* II (Banner of Truth, 1977), p. 154.

¹¹ Warfield, op. cit., p. 132.
