

The Other Cup

by Ray Dillard

I suppose if we were to find the passages in the Bible most familiar to us, Matthew 26:1-46 would have to rank very high among them. Jesus prepares for death. He is anointed and then betrayed. He and His disciples eat their last supper together, and bread and wine represent Jesus' body and blood. Jesus prays in the garden. We celebrate these passages again and again in the church. We read them with some frequency. Yet I wonder how many times you have read through the account of what takes place in the garden of Gethsemane without stopping to think exactly what it was that Jesus was praying about.

Three times the Son of God asks His own Father to take away a certain cup that He was going to have to drink. What kind of a cup was it? Why would just thinking about it cause the Son of God to say, "I am overwhelmed with sorrow, even to the point of death"? Why would one of the other Gospel writers describe this experience in Gethsemane as causing Jesus to sweat either blood itself or drops like blood? What was the cup that Jesus was praying about? How could a cup cause God's own Son such great sorrow and fear?

If we look around in the Bible for help, the imagery of a cup is used in three different ways. Periodically we read about a literal cup. Joseph had his servant take a silver cup and hide it in Benjamin's sack of grain, you remember. There were literal cups and drinking bowls. But that doesn't help us a

whole lot when we come to Matthew 26. Jesus is not praying in the garden about a literal bowl that is filled with liquid. That doesn't help us much at all.

There's a second way in which the Bible uses the imagery of a cup: as a symbol of God's blessing. The twenty-third psalm comes to mind right away where the psalmist says that his cup, his lot in life, is simply overflowing. "My cup runs over" with the goodness and blessing of God. You could take the sixteenth psalm where the psalmist says that the "Lord is my cup." God is my lot in life. Why would anyone pray, "Take this away"? That doesn't help us, either. There's no reason for Jesus to ask the Lord to take away a cup that represents His goodness, mercy, and blessing. "Take that away. Please take it away. Thinking about it brings me to the point of death." No, that doesn't do it.

There's a third way in which the Bible uses the image of a cup, and it is primarily found in the Old Testament. There in fifteen different passages the writers of the Old Covenant speak of a cup of the wine of the wrath of God, a cup which is symbolic of God's hatred of sin, symbolic of His determination that sin shall be punished. I wish we had time to read through all fifteen of those passages, but I'm going to have to limit myself to just three. We're going to go back and look in the Old Testament to see what sort of an image Jesus is drawing on. Then we want to go back to Gethsemane and see if it helps us to appreciate what's happening here in these last moments of Jesus' life.

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The first of these passages in the Old Testament is Psalm 75:7-8: "It is God who is judge: He brings one down and exalts another. In the hand of the LORD is a cup full of foaming wine mixed with spices; he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs." Here's a cup of the wine of God's wrath. Please note that it is a cup which is reserved for the wicked.

Another passage which I think is interesting in this regard is in Isaiah 51, where Isaiah contemplates the destruction that Jerusalem would experience in the great Babylonian captivity. Isaiah gives what sometimes is called a taunt song, a ridiculing song. Isaiah

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personifies the city of Jerusalem as if she were a drunk passed out on the street. We're no strangers to the sight of people overcome by alcohol and passed out in the doorways of our cities. Isaiah speaks to the city of Jerusalem, trying to rouse her from her stupor:

Awake, awake! Rise up, 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. Of all the sons she bore there was none to guide her; of all the sons she reared there was none to take her by the hand. Double calamities have come upon you—who can comfort you?—ruin and destruction, famine and sword—who can console you? Your sons have fainted; they lie at the head of every street, like antelope caught in a net. They are filled with the wrath of the LORD and the rebuke of your God. (Isa. 51:17-20)

The city of Jerusalem passed out, having drunk the cup of the wine of the wrath of God.

There's another passage, and for me, in some ways, this is the most intriguing of the lot of them. It is a sermon that Jeremiah gives in the year 604 BC. You might say legitimately, "Why, what's important about 604?" Jeremiah has been preaching in the city of Jerusalem for about twenty years at this point. Jeremiah has warned the city of Jerusalem that unless they turn from the course they're following, unless they repent of their sins, God will bring judgment against the city. After twenty years go by, Jeremiah has become, for many of the citizens of Israel, a source of entertainment and humor. But in the year 604, something dramatic had happened. In the last half of the seventh century B.C.,

the Assyrian Empire had begun to collapse. Where the Assyrians had dominated the fertile crescent for many centuries, the whole thing caved in on itself in a space of about twenty-five years. The Assyrian Empire simply came unglued. It had taken centuries to build it, but it fell apart. We can all probably recognize in our own lifetimes the way in which politics abhors a vacuum. As Assyria lost control of those nations that she had dominated for a long period of time, two formerly great empires that had been under the sway of the Assyrians were now independent: in the east, Babylon, a great empire, with millennia of foreign domination behind her, and in the south, Egypt, another great power. Remember, there's a great desert in between. That's why we have a fertile crescent. As Assyria began to shrink, these two great powers that had been empires in their own right for millennia began to reassert themselves and grab up and snap up the territory that Assyria was losing. As Assyria contracted, the armies of Egypt under Pharaoh Neco sent out and headed north, conquering territory. The armies of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, which were set out along the Euphrates River, headed north.

I think you know what happened next. Sooner or later, the armies of Egypt and Babylon met as they scrapped for the remains of the Assyrian Empire. That initial contact took place in the year 604 at a city in North Syria called Carchemesh. We remember the year 604 because it was the Battle of Carchemesh, in which the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, delivered a major defeat on the armies of Pharaoh Neco of Egypt. Neco's armies turned south and high-tailed it back into Egypt, leaving their dead and wounded and war materials strewn from North Syria down to the river in Egypt. There was no other major army on the field. No army was there to stop Nebuchadnezzar. In the year 604, Nebuchadnezzar turned south and went through Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and, eventually, to Egypt. I can't prove it to you, but I'm all but overconfident that Jeremiah delivers this sermon shortly after news has reached the city of Jerusalem that Nebuchadnezzar is on his way. For twenty years the prophet has been warning that God was going to bring judgment, and now Nebuchadnezzar's army is coming. There's no force on the field powerful enough to stop him, no one even to slow him down.

Today when we preach we tend to use a lot of stories. We call these stories sermon illustrations. The prophets, instead of telling stories so often, tended to use props. They would take a physical item, an ox's yoke, for example, or a piece of iron, and make a sermon off that object lesson. Jeremiah takes a bowl, fills it with wine, and passes it among those people listening

to him. He says, "Here, take a drink." Try now, after this long explanation, mentally to put yourself back on a hot summer day, 604 BC, on a dusty street. News has just reached the city that Nebuchadnezzar is on his way, and Jeremiah is passing the bowl around. Here's Jeremiah's sermon:

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." So I took the cup from the LORD's hand and made all the nations to whom He sent me drink it. Jerusalem and the towns of Judah, her kings and officials, to make them a ruin and an object of horror and scorn and cursing, Pharaoh, the king of Egypt and his attendants and officials and all of his people and the foreigners there and the kings of Uz and the kings of the Philistines at Ashkelon and Gaza and Ekron and the people left at Ashdod and Edom and Moab and Ammon and the kings of Tyre and Sidon and the kings in the coast lands across the sea; to Dedan, Tema, Buz, those in the distant places, the kings of Arabia, the kings of the foreigners living in the desert and all the kings of Zimri and Elam and Media and the kings in the north, near and far, one after the other, all of the kingdoms on the face of the earth. Tell them this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel says, "Drink this, get drunk. Vomit, fall and rise no more because of the sword that I am sending among you." (Jer. 25:15-27)

To tell you the truth, I suspect if I had been in the congregation that first heard this sermon, and somebody had passed me that bowl, I would have said, "Thanks, I know it's just a symbol...but I'll pass! Help yourself. Next?" I wonder if this isn't the sort of response the prophet also ran into because God continues to instruct him. He says, "If they refuse to take the cup from your hand and drink, tell them, 'This is what the LORD Almighty says. You *must* and you *shall* drink it!'" (Jer. 25:28).

Nebuchadnezzar was bringing God's wrath to all the nations of the Near East, and the prophet describes it as if they're tasting the wine of the wrath of God.

I wish we could look at other passages in Jeremiah, Lamentations, Psalms, Ezekiel, and Zechariah to follow the image on through, but I think you've seen enough to get some taste of this image and its frequency in the Old Testament. At least fifteen passages speak of the cup of the wine of the wrath of God. Other passages just speak of the wine of the wrath of God without reference

to a cup in particular.

Can we go back to Gethsemane for a few minutes? What kind of a cup was it that Jesus was praying about? What kind of a cup could cause the Son of God to have such fear?

Psalm 75, the first passage that we read, said that the Lord has a cup in His hand which is reserved for the *wicked*. You and I recognize in our heart of hearts that we deserve our portion of that cup because we have transgressed the law of God. Not a day goes by in which each one of us does not offend God's holiness in some way. You and I recognize that it's entirely just for a cup which is reserved for the wicked to be our cup.

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But do you understand that Jesus was the one human being who has ever lived on God's earth on whom that cup had absolutely no claim whatsoever? He had kept God's law in its entirety, perfectly. There was no sin in Him. Perhaps we can feel something of the revulsion that Jesus felt, something of His fear. Three times: "Father, please take this away. God in heaven—anything but this!"

It's interesting to me the way in which John handles these events in his Gospel. John does not tell us about Jesus' prayer in the garden. After the discourses in the upper room in John 18, John tells us that Jesus and the disciples went to a place where Jesus was accustomed to pray. But we don't hear about His praying there other than that the chapter begins, "When He had finished praying." We don't hear about the specific prayer. But when Jesus came out of the garden, and the mob was ready to arrest Him, Simon Peter took a sword and struck the high priest's servant, a man named Malchus, and lopped off one of his ears. Jesus stopped Peter at the mouth of the garden with these words: "Put your sword away. Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?" (v.11). Do you see the transition? In the garden Jesus is saying, "Lord, if it is possible, let this cup pass. Let your will be done." Coming out of the garden, Jesus knows His answer. He came out with a resolve in His own heart, "Shall I not drink the cup that the Lord has given me?"

I suspect most of us remember a little of high school chemistry to know something about how wine is made. Wine is the byproduct of yeast feeding on sugar. They

turn sugar, by weight, into wine, ethyl alcohol, and carbon dioxide, the bubbles that go off in the fermentation process. The yeast will continue to consume the sugar until they create so much alcohol that the environment becomes toxic for the yeast, the alcohol kills the yeast, or they will produce alcohol until they have consumed all the sugar there and they die. This process is happening all around us in the world, the process of fermentation. Equally present in the air we breathe and on almost every piece of fruit are other microorganisms, which, if they are introduced into a fermenting must, will, in a matter of hours, turn that wine into vinegar. That's why, if you go to a good grocery store,

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you can find perhaps twenty different kinds of wine vinegar. It's wine that has gone sour, wine that has turned into vinegar. Soured wine.

John tells us that when Jesus came out of the garden, He came out with a resolution in His own heart to taste the cup that God had appointed for Him. With that statement in John, do you think John is finished with the subject? Not on your life! Look at John 19:28 for a moment. This is unique to the gospel of John. Early in His crucifixion, Jesus was offered a drink of wine mixed with gall or myrrh. Most people think it was a sedative of some sort, something to ease His suffering, but Jesus refused that drink. He turned it down. But late in the crucifixion, Jesus was offered another drink. John handles this differently than any other gospel writer. Listen to how John focuses on this drink: "Later, knowing that all was now completed..." John is telling us that Jesus had come to that moment in His life when He knew that everything God had sent Him here to do had been done. It was all finished except one thing.

Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it and put it on a stalk of a hyssop plant, and they lifted it to Jesus' lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his life. (John 19:28-30)

John wants us to see that Jesus really did drink the cup the Father had appointed for Him. Having prayed in

the garden, in effect, "Lord, anything but this—please take this away," Jesus bowed to the will of His Father as His last act. The one thing that He had to do before He could surrender His life was to symbolically taste that cup of the wine of God's fury in the form of the sour wine that was offered to Him on the cross.

Consider how, in our day, we love to hear about the love of God. Most evangelical preaching is in that general area. Look at your typical televangelist, and you hear a lot about the love of God. A month ago *Christianity Today* carried a survey among evangelical theologians and ministers. The disproportionate interest in the love and the wrath of God was striking, many evangelical preachers finding the wrath of God a less usable concept in our day. Please understand that the cross, which is the supreme demonstration of the love of God, is simultaneously the supreme demonstration of how much God hates sin and of what sin costs because it's at the cross that we learn to estimate the price of sin.

The beauty of the gospel is that only moments before Jesus meets with a select few in the garden and then goes on to pray about the cup He was facing, He meets with His disciples in an upper room and says, "Look, I have a new cup for you, a new and different cup. This is not a cup of the wine of God's fury but a cup filled with my blood, a cup of the forgiveness of sin, not a cup of cursing, but a cup of blessing. Drink from it, all of you."

In Matthew 26 we have two cups laid down side by side: the one cup—the wine of God's fury—the one Christ would take for us, and the other cup, the one you and I are going to share this night in remembrance of Him, the cup of the forgiveness of sins.

I travel a reasonable amount, and I seem to get most of my witnessing done in those circumstances. It never ceases to amaze me how predictable the response is on the part of people I meet on airplanes who, once you start talking about the gospel, not too long into the conversation, respond with something like, "I'm so glad for you, that you have found something that makes your life full. This isn't for me. I'm glad you Christians have got something. It's wonderful. Don't get me wrong, but I just don't have any interest in that. I really feel neutral about all of that." I wish there were a third option. I wish it were possible to find a middle ground. But we have only two cups. That's all. As Jeremiah said to that crowd so long ago, "You must, and you shall, drink." The issue is just which cup is it going to be. That's all.

To say I want no part in the cup that Christ offers me—"That's not for me, I just don't want anything to do with it"—is not to take a neutral ground. That says I do want my portion of the wine of God's wrath, full

strength.

There's one passage that takes up this image again. In the middle of the book of Revelation, when John has been describing the great cosmic conflict between good and evil, the great battle between the Lamb and the dragon, an angel appears and says in a loud voice:

If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink the wine of God's fury, poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name. (Rev. 14:9-11)

Do you see why just thinking about facing the wrath of His own Father against sin would cause God's own Son to sweat blood? How terrible it promised to be!

Folks, if anything ought to drive you and me out of our complacency about the gospel, think of the alternatives. There's no middle ground here. Dear friends, if there is anything that ought to impel you and me to go after our loved ones and family and neighbors and to minister to them the gospel of Christ, the good news that there's another cup, there is a way that our sins can be forgiven, if there's anything that ought to drive us, it's the knowledge of the alternative that they face. Just thinking about a brief experience of God's fury could cause the Son of God to be overwhelmed with sorrow, even brought to the point of death. What ought it to do for us?

We struggle with how to get a hold of words that are adequate to give our thanks to God for His grace toward us. Folks, I *know* I deserve the wrath of God. I know that. But I don't understand at all how God could love me, and offer His own Son that I might have the forgiveness of sins and have life again. That's beyond words. When we struggle, thinking about God's grace toward us, and words seem to fail us, I think of the psalmist in the 116th psalm who seemed to have the

same problem when he said, "What shall I render to the LORD for all of His benefits toward me?" (v. 12). He answered his own question, saying, "I will take the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD" (v. 13).

I was a little less than completely honest with you a few minutes ago when we read a portion of Scripture in Isaiah 51 because I didn't read the end of it. I'd like for you to hear how Isaiah ended this sermon to Jerusalem, the drunk, because he ends that sermon, saying:

Hear this, you who are afflicted and made

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drunk, but not with wine, this is what the Sovereign LORD says, your God, who defends his people: "Look, I have taken out of your hand the cup that made you stagger; from that cup, the goblet of my wrath, you will never drink again." (vv. 21-22)

Let's pray.

Our Father, we pray that You would teach us to be less cavalier about sin. Remind us afresh of what it means that You are holy, that You are without sin, that You dwell in light unapproachable. Oh, Lord, Father, if You hate sin in this world, how much more must sin be displeasing in Your sight when it is among those who name the name of Christ. Father, forgive us, we pray, for our transgressions. Forgive us for our wanton disregard of Your law. Our God in heaven, hear our hearts overflowing with praise for Your mercy toward us in giving us this new cup, a cup of forgiveness. In the name of Christ, Amen.