

ARTICLE III.

THE GETHSEMANE AGONY.

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BEYOND a question, a very large majority of Bible students and readers see in our Lord's agony in the garden the natural recoil and shrinking of the soul from a painful and ignominious death, and in his submissive words, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt," an example for us of patience in the event of unanswered prayer, and humble acceptance of the Father's will instead of our own. Many have found comfort and heart-strengthening from this interpretation. The view of scriptural questions taken by the average Christian is generally pretty correct, and it is a serious matter to discard it. Such rejection must be accompanied by strong proof, to make it permissible. It is, however, a fact that sometimes a genuine truth will be based on a mistaken use of Scripture. Every helpful lesson which has been drawn from the common view of the Gethsemane agony can be found elsewhere in the Word of God; so that the Christian world will not lose, and may gain, if we find that the view ordinarily accepted is not correct. Other interpretations have been given, and one, quite different from the common view, seems to the writer to have such scriptural warrant as to justify its acceptance. Before setting forth this better interpretation, certain facts and considerations should be examined which militate strongly against that commonly received.

1. It is well known that strength of will, lofty purpose, and

high views of truth and duty have often upheld mere men in the face of death at least as painful and humiliating as that which Jesus suffered. From the American Indian, who bore unflinchingly the worst tortures his enemies could devise, and Regulus, the Roman hero who went calmly to face the fury of Carthage, to Christ's own disciples who have not only met a brutal death cheerfully, but have often needed to be restrained from seeking a martyr's crown, men have shown their ability to rise superior to the terrors of death. The fact that Christian martyrs have been upheld by the Holy Spirit leads us to reflect that our Lord had the presence of that Spirit in the highest degree. Often, filled with the Spirit who dwelt in fullness in our Lord, men and women have been brought face to face suddenly with the certainty of a speedy and painful death, and have met the situation at least without showing any outward signs of panic or fear. Knowing this, many a Christian has been perplexed by the record of our Lord's agony, and has almost felt that an apology for him was needed.

2. It is hard to reconcile our Lord's agony in the garden, interpreted in the common way, with his own previous statements. Early in his ministry he had plainly told his disciples of the violent death which awaited him, and the shameful treatment which should accompany it, and he sternly rebuked Peter, who ventured to enter a protest. He represented himself as eager to reach this crowning part of his life-work: "But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!" (Luke xii. 50). When on the mount of transfiguration he talked with Moses and Elijah, the theme of their conversation was "his decease which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (Luke ix. 31). His death was a large part of his stock in trade, if we may so

speak, meditated upon, planned for, talked about with his disciples. His last discourse with them was full of it, and he spoke of it with the utmost calmness. It would be very strange if, after accustoming himself to the thought so long, he should break down at last in the presence of the fact.

3. He represented himself a master of life and death. In his eyes death was a very simple thing. With a word he was able to call the spirit back and bid it animate the body once more. He declared that his death, when it should occur, would not be from man's having gained the mastery over him, but from his own independent, unconstrained choice: "Therefore doth the Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one taketh it away from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment received I from my Father" (John x. 17-18).

4. He knew that his death was to close his painful, toilsome course here on earth, and permit him to take his former place in glory. Thus he prayed, "And now, Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was" (John xvii. 5).

5. A protest must be entered against the idea that Jesus offered a prayer, a petition, which was not granted. We read concerning our own prayers, "And this is the boldness which we have toward him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us: and if we know that he heareth us whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions which we have asked of him" (1 John v. 14-15). If a prayer of ours, heard of God in the scriptural sense, is answered, and we know that we have the thing desired, much more must it have been true of Jesus. When he stood at the grave of Lazarus, he said: "Father, I thank thee that thou heardest me. And I

knew that thou hearest me always ; but because of the multitude that standeth around I said it, that they may believe that thou sendest me " (John xi. 41-42). We must therefore conclude that Jesus never presented to his Father a petition which was not granted. Certainly this prayer in the garden would be the only known exception. But it is written concerning this of Jesus, " Who in the days of his flesh, having offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and having been heard for his godly fear, though he was a Son, yet learned obedience by the things which he suffered " (Heb. v. 7). It seems very clear, therefore, that, however the prayer in the garden may be explained, the explanation must rest on the assumption that Christ obtained what he asked. He learned obedience by things which he suffered, not by having his petition denied. Further, since by this statement in Hebrews he did ask to be saved from death, and his prayer must be assumed to have been answered, and since he was not saved from the death on the cross, our explanation of the case, to be consistent with known facts, must rest on the assumption that it was quite another death from that on the cross from which he asked to be delivered.

Let us now study the elements in the actual situation which may guide to an understanding of the prayer.

1. Christ's Physical Condition. He must have been exceedingly exhausted and worn after the terrible strain of the last few days. The intensity of his absorption in the work which he had in hand may be inferred from his feeling the pangs of hunger on Monday morning of his last week as he went into the city. This must indicate that the loving hospitality of the home in Bethany had not been used by Jesus that morning so far as to take breakfast. Andrews suggests that

he may have spent the preceding night in solitude and prayer.¹ In this night of the agony in the garden there had of course been no chance to rest. It must have been with an exceedingly worn physique that he came to the trying ordeal of the Gethsemane experience, whatever it was. The singular phenomenon, however, of bloody sweat, could not have resulted from mere exhaustion. But few similar cases are on record, and the condition is always a result of some great mental distress.

2. An examination of certain Greek expressions used in the narrative will be of value. Matthew and Mark both report Jesus as saying, *Περίλυπός ἐστὶν ἡ ψυχὴ μου ἕως θανάτου*, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death." Matthew reports of him earlier that he *ἤρξατο λυπεῖσθαι καὶ ἀδημονεῖν*, "began to be sorrowful and sore troubled." *Περίλυπος* means, in both classic and New Testament Greek, "very sorrowful," "wholly grieved," "very sad," "deeply grieved," etc. There is no instance of the word expressing dismay in view of a future event. It rather expresses deep grief for some past event or present condition. Similarly *λυπεῖσθαι* means "to be sad," "to mourn," "to grieve." *Ἀδημονεῖν* means, in classic Greek, "to be cast down," "troubled," or "in anguish," and in New Testament Greek, "to be sated," "to be wearied," and then "to be heavy," "to be dejected." It is used but thrice in the New Testament, viz. in Matthew's and Mark's accounts of the agony, and in Phil. ii. 26, "since he longed after you all, and was sore troubled, because ye had heard that he was sick." Thus we must understand the reference here to be to some cause of sorrow rather than the fear of a future woe. Again, Mark says of Jesus, *ἤρξατο ἐκθαμβεῖσθαι καὶ ἀδημονεῖν*. *Ἐκθαμβεῖσθαι* means, in

¹ Life of our Lord, p. 436.

both classic and New Testament Greek, "to be quite stunned" or "amazed." The word is used only by Mark, and only four times by him, viz. of the people when they saw Jesus come from the mount of transfiguration (ix. 15); the case in hand (xiv. 33); and when the women saw the young man in Jesus' tomb, and were "amazed," and bidden by the young man not to be "amazed" (xvi. 5 and 6). The word does not express fear of a coming event in these cases, nor fear of personal harm, so much as astonishment in view of something actually before the eyes. These definitions would lead us to think that Jesus was exceeding sorrowful, sad, in anguish, amazed, not from fear of any bodily suffering which he must endure, but rather in view of some dreadful facts which were appearing to him in a new light, and in view of some great distress actually upon him at that moment. We may here, in connection with these expressions which we have been examining, properly remember the limitations to which his humanity subjected him. As the date of his second coming was concealed from him, so probably were other facts. It is very likely that the awful character of sin, and the vastness of the price which must be paid to make an atonement for it, had not been fully revealed to him. Now, as he is coming to the climax of his work, to humanity's crisis, he is given a fuller vision than ever before of the two facts. They oppress him so that his sorrow and amazement are more than his exhausted frame can bear. It would seem a contradiction for him to say that for fear of death he was at the point of death; but this view of sin's enormity and of what he must pass through to redeem men from its penalty, a vastly greater price than mere bodily death, as we shall see later, might well pass the power of a mortal body to endure. Let us then take our Lord's words, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death,"

as literally true. He was aghast at the exceeding sinfulness of sin, clearly as he had seen it before, and perhaps at the price which necessity was laid on him to pay, and his mortal frame was ready to sink beneath the horror of the sight.

3. Let us now look at our Lord's words, as recorded by Mark, "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (xiv. 38). The common interpretation of this is that while he chose the cross, yet the bodily shrinking was extreme. This view, however, involves us in contradictions.

(1) We must admit that our Lord's shrinking from bodily pain was such that it for the time overpowered the willingness of his spirit to suffer, so that he prayed his Father to find, if possible, some other way for him to achieve his atoning work than by death on the cross. It is a contradiction to say that Christ was divine, and then to say that his bodily shrinking from pain could so overmaster the willingness of the Holy Spirit within him, for his spirit was wholly under the sway of the Holy Spirit.

(2) He knew what was the plan and will of God regarding his bodily death. He had taught and practised entire submission to that will. He knew that Satan was opposing that will with all his might. He had met and vanquished him again and again. To have asked to have the path changed which had been marked out for him would have been to yield to Satan's appeals. But he had said shortly before, in that same night, "The prince of the world cometh; and he hath nothing in me." Furthermore, to have yielded to the desire to avoid pain in any degree would have been a yielding to the selfish nature, to what Paul calls the "flesh," since the salvation of men demanded the death on the cross. I cannot find that Jesus ever used the word "flesh" in that sense, except in possibly one instance. He used it chiefly of the human body, and once of

the life of mankind, "and except those days had been shortened, no flesh would have been saved" (Matt. xxiv. 22; Mark xiii. 20). The one possible exception is John viii. 15, "Ye judge after the flesh." Thus there is every reason to believe that Jesus referred to his body when he said, "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." He meant that there was no shrinking on his part from the task which lay before him, but his body was in danger of not being able to endure the awful strain. A difficulty may arise here in the minds of some, from the fact that Jesus spoke these words in connection with his warning to Peter to watch and pray lest he enter into temptation. It might be thought that Jesus meant that He was in danger from the temptation of the devil, and thus weight be given to the old interpretation of the prayer of Christ. We must, however, make this our rule, that where there are strong considerations militating against one interpretation, so strong that we have reason to believe that it cannot possibly be correct, an apparent argument in favor of that interpretation must not be allowed to overrule the weightier arguments on the other side. The fact must be allowed that the prayer of Jesus was granted. Therefore he could not have asked to be delivered from the death on the cross, for that deliverance was not granted. These words immediately under consideration were addressed to Peter, whom, after his emphatic declaration of attachment and loyalty, Jesus finds sleeping. He says to him, "Simon, sleepest thou? couldest thou not watch one hour? watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." It might be thought that Jesus did not refer to himself at all in these words, but to Peter's weakness alone. It seems more natural, however, to regard our Lord as looking with pitying, sympathetic eye on Peter. He knew how satanic

legions filled that garden. He knew how his own body was breaking under the strain. He knew that in Peter's case the body would run away with the spirit. Thus, compassionately looking on his disciple, reading him a lesson out of his own experience, he exhorts him to pray that the adversary may not have full opportunity to attack him, lest his weakness of flesh, and the power of the flesh over the spirit in his case, deliver him into his adversary's hands, instead of leading him to prevalence in prayer as was the case with his Lord.¹

4. *Christ's Atoning Work.* Let us now look at the work of atonement which our Lord had in hand. Without entering into a discussion of how he met the needs of a race of lost men, we can readily see that his bodily death on the cross was not the means by which he wrought out the atonement. It is written of him, "that by the grace of God he should taste of death for every man" (Heb. ii. 9). He did much more than taste of bodily death. He drank that cup to the dregs. To "taste" would not be an expression at all applicable to the case. There must have been another death than that of the body which was given him to taste. It is again written "who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree" (1 Pet. ii. 24). He must have borne our punishment, which is not mere bodily death, but death eternal. What is eternal death? In Jesus' last prayer among his disciples, he said, "and this is life eternal, that they should know thee, the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ" (John xvii. 3). Then eternal death must consist, in its essence at least, in not knowing God, in being separated from him. To us, with spiritual vision dimmed by sin, it does not seem such

¹ If we take this view, we shall then say that our Lord used the word "flesh" in a double sense, referring to his own physical frame, but referring to Peter's tendency to let personal desires dominate the spirit.

a dreadful thing, but to Jesus it must have been the most awful thing in the universe. He had never known it in the least degree. He could not have been able to anticipate its dreadful character. But this was the death which he was to taste for every man. For somewhat of the same reasons mentioned regarding an appeal to be delivered from bodily death on the cross, we cannot think that Jesus prayed to be delivered from this cup, though almost infinitely more terrible than the other. Though he could not have known it all in advance, he knew he must taste it, and would not prove faithless to his covenant. Besides, as we have seen, our solution of the difficulty must harmonize with the fact that his prayer was answered.

5. Christ's speedy death after being nailed to the cross, and the point in his agony at which his death came, are worth our attention in this study. It is true that his body was enfeebled, and especially so by his agony in the garden. Yet he showed such strength and composure through the trying ordeal in Pilate's court that the governor was astonished by learning that he died so soon. His death, however, followed soon after his cry "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" so soon after that a connection between them seems reasonable. That is, the withdrawal of his Father's face, causing him to taste the bitterness of eternal death, and causing him to experience the keenest agony that he had ever known, would naturally conduce to the collapse of his physical powers. It is a very natural supposition to think that this collapse was coming on in the garden. It was the new experience of banishment from his Father, and the new view of the enormity of sin gained as the greatness of the suffering needed to make an atonement became more clear to him which caused him to be "amazed," "exceeding sorrowful, even unto death." Satan

was there. To the posse which came to arrest him Jesus said, "but this is your hour, and the power of darkness." We cannot question that Satan would have been glad to interfere in the work of atonement by killing Jesus before he could get to the cross. Doubtless he was pressing Jesus with all his might. Bodily death seemed imminent. But, even though Jesus had tasted eternal death in the garden, by the withdrawal there of his Father's face, yet if he had died there the atoning work, perfect on its Godward side, would not have been complete on the manward side. Men would not have understood it. As his bodily resurrection is needed as a proof to men of his power over the grave, so the cross is needed as a symbol of his atoning work. How much poorer the world would have been, if the cross and the shedding of his blood had never been facts! The atonement without the cross would have been a fact, but an unpreachable gospel. This he seemed to be facing. This, we may well believe, Satan wanted to accomplish. If God, in his infinite wisdom, should choose to change his plan, his Son would consent; but he pleaded to be delivered from death then that he might come to the cross, to be delivered from the bitter cup of having his atoning work made incomplete, and ineffective. His body was not capable of bearing the load which was coming upon him, and as he had not before been willing to work miracles in his own behalf, neither was he now. Here let us note that Luke records that, in the midst of the agony of that prayer, "there appeared unto him an angel from heaven, strengthening him." This makes more evident the threatening collapse of his body. It was so imminent that, so far from being able to endure the stress of the redemptive work and still reach the cross, he had not the physical strength necessary for the agonizing prayer which could gain respite. Let us again refer to Hebrews v. 7:

“Who, in the days of his flesh, having offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and having been heard for his godly fear.” Then he asked to be saved from death. He was heard, and his prayer was answered. But he was not saved from death on the cross. Therefore the death from which he prayed to be delivered was that which threatened him at that moment, and which would have kept him from the cross. How glorious a spectacle is that of our Saviour, instead of shrinking from the agony by which we were to be saved, shrinking from and dreading with agony unspeakable, anything which could make his atoning work of less value to us!

6. The Result. There is reason to believe that the withdrawal of his Father's face was postponed till he was on the cross. He was manifestly upheld by his Father's power through the ordeal of the trial and being nailed to the cross. His confident words to Peter, to the High Priest, and to the penitent thief show him in full possession of his Father's favor and power. Just why this experience in the garden came to him, why the withdrawal of his Father's face was not left till he was on the cross, perhaps we may not know, but must leave it with many other mysteries in the secret counsels of the Godhead. Certainly the Christian world is immeasurably enriched by the account of the Gethsemane scene.

NOTES.

1. In the light of this study we may better understand the words of Jesus recorded in John xii. 27-28: “Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour. But for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify thy name.” It was not the approach of bodily death, however painful and attended by humiliating circumstances,

which agitated him, but the coming shadow of the dread experience in which he was to taste the bitterness of eternal death for every man.

2. Our Lord's words to Peter, "Thinkest thou that I cannot beseech my Father, and he shall even now send me more than twelve legions of angels? How then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?" (Matt. xxvi. 53-54) are directly in line with the thought of this study. Jesus shows his perfect confidence that he can escape the cross if he shall so choose, that his Father will give him what he asks for, but he will not ask for what he knows is not in line with the plan of God.

3. It may be said that Jesus knew that he was to die on the cross, and therefore he did not need to pray not to be permitted to die before he reached it. To this it may be replied that in the matter of prayer he took a place among his brethren. Though God says that a certain step forward in the work of his Kingdom shall be taken, he does not release us from the necessity of praying it through.