



The sorrowful Christ

The Gospels portray the sorrow of Jesus in a variety of contexts. Mark tells us that in the face of the deaf man who came for healing, Jesus was deeply moved at the spectacle of widespread human suffering: “And looking up to heaven **he sighed** and said to him, **Ephphatha**, that is, *Be opened*” (Mark 7:34). Similarly, in Mark 8:12, “**he sighed deeply** in his spirit” when he witnessed the hardness and blindness of the Pharisees. The tears shed over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41) and over the grave of Lazarus (John 11:35) gave evidence of sorrow over spiritual and physical death. Emotions of compassion, anger and sorrow co-mingle in the heart of the Lord and bear silent witness to his perfect human reactions to the fallenness of the world around him.

It is interesting that John cites three occasions where Jesus’ soul is said to have been perturbed and troubled. The first is at John 11:33: He was deeply moved in his spirit (anger) *and greatly troubled* (sorrow).

Similar words are found at John 12:27, and at John 13:21: After saying these things, Jesus *was troubled in his spirit* and testified, ‘*Truly, truly I say to you, one of you will betray me*’.

So Jesus’ soul is agitated when he sees what death has done to others, how he is to be betrayed over to death, and how his death is approaching. Warfield suggests that

His deep agitation was clearly, therefore, not due to mere recoil from the physical appearance of death ... Behind death he saw him who has the power of death, and that sin which constitutes the sting of death. His whole being revolted from that final and deepest humiliation, in which the powers of evil were to inflict upon him the precise penalty of human sin ... So profound a repugnance to death and all that death meant, manifesting itself during his life, could not fail to seize upon him with peculiar intensity at the end.

(PWC, 129)

So to understand the sorrow of our Saviour, we need to visit the sorrow of Gethsemane, and what it reveals to us of the Saviour’s soul. For it is with his entry to that garden that Matthew tells us that Jesus “*began to be sorrowful and troubled*” (Matthew 26:37), and he said to Peter, James and John: “*My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here and watch with me*” (Matthew 26:38).

It is important to see the relationship between Gethsemane and Calvary. As Hugh Martin puts it, in his excellent treatment of Gethsemane, *The Shadow of Calvary*:

The darkness of Gethsemane must be regarded as but the shadow of Calvary ... the sorrows of the garden arose from the prospect and foresight of the sorrows of the cross.

(SC, p27)

Martin draws out the implication of this: that the sight of the cross drew out from him his sorrow, which in turn became the subject and object of his praying in Gethsemane. So in order to do justice to the biblical testimony regarding the sorrow of our Lord in the light of the cross, we need to follow events as they unfold between Gethsemane and Golgotha. There we see that Jesus is indeed a man of sorrows, for several reasons.

First, he is a Man of Sorrows because of his **isolation**. There was a place to which only he could go, and where only he could walk. As Isaiah puts it, “*I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with me*” (Isaiah 63:3). That isolation is symbolised in the detail supplied in Luke’s gospel: “*And he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw*” (Luke 22:41). God said of the

first Adam that it was not good that he was alone. Yet of the last Adam, aloneness was the only fitting state for the transaction of this great business.

Second, he is a Man of Sorrows because of his **submission**. Jesus speaks of his cross as a cup. Only he may drink it. Only he can drink it. Yet the drinking of it requires his acceptance of it. Since his childhood he has been conscious of doing *'his Father's business'*; his meat and drink is to do the will of the one who sent him, and to finish his work (John 4:34). Now the cup is to his lips. In the words of Hugh Martin:

This was what Gethsemane beheld transacted between the Father and the Son. Finally and formally the Father proposes to Jesus the assumption of the guilt of his Church unto himself. Finally and formally Jesus accepts and confirms what had been determined mutually in the counsel of peace from everlasting.

(SC, 31)

The cup, with its foretaste of Calvary, produced the sorrow; but the sorrow, in turn, drove the prayer to its final resolution and rest in the will of God. So, as Gethsemane is a place of sorrow; it also became, in Hugh Martin's language, a prayer-chamber. It is, therefore, a place where Jesus identifies with his people in their need to wrestle with God in the prayers to which their sorrows have given birth. Hugh Martin stresses this:

Come ... to Gethsemane. Come, see the place where the Lord prayed! Here he prayed with supplications and strong crying and tears, wrestling even unto blood. True, he is not here, He is ascended as He said. And his prayers now are glorified, even as his person is. But still, even as the grave is sweetened with the fragrant savour of his burial and the believer's body there shall rest, still united to Christ, till the resurrection; so now when you enter Gethsemane, is it not fragrant with the savour and the success of him whose strong crying and tears Gethsemane witnessed; and may you not here continue instant in prayer, united to and in communion with him, and having fellowship in the prayer of him who was here as your forerunner?

(SC, 124)

Third, he is a Man of Sorrows because of his **weakness**. That is registered in two ways. First, Luke tells us, with a physician's eye and interest, that *"being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground"* (Luke 22:44). This is not the overactive imagination of the gospel writer at work. It is *"a known medical condition called hematomatosis. It's not very common, but it is associated with a high degree of psychological stress"* (see Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, p195).

The agony is within, yet its symptoms are without. His soul is *exceeding* sorrowful; and the excess of sorrow finds its expression in an excess of sweat. Just as the first Adam was made body and soul, created with psychosomatic unity, so the last Adam bears the same nature; and the sufferings of his soul break through his very skin. Warfield quotes from the Puritan Thomas Goodwin, who says that this *'curse of his soul'* was *"a heaviness unto death, not extensive so as to die, but intensive, that if he had died it could not have suffered more"* (*Works*, V, p272).

Secondly, an angel is sent from Heaven to strengthen him (Luke 22:43). Sorrow was so great at this point, that supernatural help is required. Yet the One who could have commanded legions of angels is permitted just one to assist him. What did the angel do that gave Jesus comfort in sorrow? Did he speak words of consolation? Did he wipe the blood away? — certainly the disciples did not refer to the blood. Hugh Martin suggests that the only possible comfort an angel could give the Son of God incarnate would be to worship him — *"an angel comes to strengthen and refresh his drooping spirit with the seasonable and assured conviction that he shall yet be glorified with the glory which he had with the Father before the world was"* (SC, p21). Yet it was a strengthening for further torture, sorrow and suffering; as the baptism had given way to the temptation, and the transfiguration to the meeting with the demon-possessed man, so the strengthening of the angel gave way to the further degradation of trial and death.

Fourth, he is a Man of Sorrows because of his **condemnation**. There is no doubt whatsoever that the trial of Jesus, in and of itself, was a sham. At a human level, he is victim of a gross miscarriage

of justice. There is no fault in him, and his exchange with Barabbas is telling: the man guilty of violence, uprising and murder is freed, while the man who did no violence, neither was there deceit in his mouth, is executed. This particular sin must have been as much a sorrow to him as any other, not because it was unfair to himself, but because it was dishonouring to God. His soul is sensitive to the fact that sin is abounding.

Fifth, he is a Man of Sorrows because of his **forsakenness**. Everything leads up to the point of dereliction. Christ is utterly alone, pained and dying. The disciples have gone. The angels have gone. The world has turned away. All this he understands. But the greatest sorrow of all is registered in the unfathomable question, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

I want just to say two things about Christ's question. First, it is a faith-question. The wrath is poured out, the horrors register, the sorrow is unique and unparalleled in all human experience. Yet Jesus says *"MY God"*. Faith does not crumble under trial; it triumphs over sorrow. The cross is the supreme example of that.

Second, it is a covenant-question. Jesus says *"My GOD"*. The only justification for Jesus' calling his Father his God is because he has taken a position of subordination within the covenant, to be the servant. His question — *"why have you forsaken me?"* — is unfathomable, but it is not unanswerable. The only place in which Jesus can search for an answer is within the terms of a covenantal relationship. So he asks the question "why", not because there is no answer to it, but because the same covenant whose curse is poured out on his head at this moment, also contains within itself the blessing that he is to enjoy as a result.

He loved me and gave himself for me, but at great emotional cost to himself.

Let me conclude with one or two practical points.

First, the Man of Sorrows is well placed to understand all our sorrows. *"What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear..."* Or, in the words of Isaiah 53:4, *"he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows"*. His identification with his people legitimises their grief. Christ nowhere tells us that it is wrong for us to cry, to sorrow, to register loss, to ask 'why?' Through the waters, fire and flood, he says *"I will be with you"* (Isaiah 43:1-2). What he promises is not the absence of sorrow; indeed, he says, *"in the world you will have tribulation"* (John 16:33).

Second, the Man of Sorrows has dealt with the problem at its root. Sorrow is the consequence of sin, and sin is what he has dealt with. That is why he can promise us that our joy will be full (1 John 1:4). And it is also why he can hold out the prospect of a day when sorrow and sighing will flee away (Isaiah 51:11): *"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away"* (Revelation 21:4). The cross represents the great reversal, legitimising for us the great promise of Psalm 30:5 — *"weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning"*.

Iain D Campbell

© 2014
www.christianstudylibrary.org