

Love beyond knowledge

by Ty Gibson

When the **darkness** was the absolute darkest...**no life** beyond the grave in sight.....He **chose** our eternal life over His own.

I WOULD LIKE TO INVITE YOU to engage with me in a spiritual experiment. The Hypothesis of the experiment is that God's love is more powerful than sin, that the love of God as revealed in the Cross of Christ, when seen and believed, naturally turns the heart away from sin.

Your part is quite simple. But if all goes according to plan, the whole thing will not end up simple at all. To the contrary, the experiment promises to yield some very satisfying results.

All you have to do is pay attention to what happens in your heart and mind as we go through this chapter. Take note of your thoughts and feelings. Especially be aware of any activity occurring in your will, such as a strong sense of desire or determination.

Ready? Let's begin.

As Jesus and His disciples approach the Garden of Gethsemane, something extremely significant is about to happen. In fact, all of history is about to converge at a single point of destiny, toward which each day and every moment have been relentlessly rushing. Just now, in the next relatively brief period of time, the crescendo of all divine self-disclosure, the apex of infinite love, will burst into the invisible, tangible dimension of reality. And the world, indeed the universe, will never again be the same.

Watch.

"Then Jesus came with them [His disciples] to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, 'Sit here while I go and pray over there.' And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. Then He came to them, 'My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death'" (Matthew 26:36-38, NKJV).

Strange, don't you think?

Jesus has not yet been taken to Calvary, and yet He is dying. No one has laid a hand on His physical person. He has not been betrayed. No crown of thorns has been pressed upon His brow. No nails have been hammered through His flesh. Nor has He even been beaten by Pilate's ruthless soldiers.

And yet, right here, right now, in the quietude of a midnight-serene garden, the Saviour tells His disciples that He is on the verge of death.

On second thought, it's not strange at all. Did you notice that the Saviour's words pointed to His *soul* as the point at which this mysterious death is occurring? And did you notice He said the cause of His dying is a *sorrow* so intense that it's lethal? "My soul (not His body) is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death."

This is no kind of dying from physical causes. Jesus is experiencing a soul-level death. Something that exceeds sorrow is preying upon His inner person. It seems as though sorrow is the best word He can find to describe what He's going through, and yet, the word falls short. So He says, *What I am experiencing is beyond sorrow. It's an internal pain so great, so deep, so intense that it's stealing My life away.*

He had earlier told His disciples, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28, NKJV). On the one hand, there is such a thing as mere physical death. On the other hand, there is the death of both the body and the soul. By His own description, Jesus is obviously entering the dark realm of the second death, the one that involves the soul. But what exactly is it, and what does it mean to the Saviour?

The prophet Isaiah foretold the sacrifice of Christ and made repeated mention that the Saviour would suffer and die at the soul level of His being. Isaiah gives a graphic description of the awful ordeal, which clearly opens to us our Lord’s sacrifice. Notice the inspired words carefully:

“He is despised and rejected of men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief...Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities.... And the Lord [the father] has laid on Him [the Son] the iniquity of us all.....For the transgressions of My people He was stricken...His soul [was] an offering for sin...He shall see [experience] the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities... .Because He poured out His soul unto death, and He was numbered with the transgressors, and He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53, NKJV, selected verses).

This is an amazing messianic prophecy. It offers incredibly vivid insights into the true nature of Christ’s death. Two points stand out:

1. As the premiere Old Testament prophecy of the Saviour’s sacrifice, Isaiah fifty-three makes little if any mention of physical suffering. Rather, Isaiah describes a deeper agony that would occur on the internal, emotional level. Three times he says the Saviour’s suffering and death would center in His “soul”.
2. The lethal ingredients of His death would be grief, sorrow and sin. This explains why His suffering was primarily internal. Sin produces the excruciating psychological and emotional phenomenon the Bible calls *condemnation* or *guilt*. Jesus did not merely experience the sense of condemnation attached to one person’s life of sin, but rather, “the iniquity of us all.” In His own heart and mind He was plunged into the collective whole of all human evil as though He were the guilty party. He took into Himself, as the responsible One, the mental and emotional horror that sin’s condemnation ultimately imposes on the inner consciousness of the soul.

With Isaiah’s added insight as a backdrop, let us return to the Garden of Gethsemane.

After telling His disciples He is dying a soul level death, He “fell on His face, and prayed, saying, ‘O My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt’” (Matthew 26:39). This agonizing prayer, pouring forth from the Saviour’s heart, opens our understanding to the nature of His pain and the cause of His death. So great is His anguish that He actually ventures to ask for relief, but only “if it is possible.” Do you discern the conflict in His heart,

and do you see yourself at the center of that conflict? He is pleading, *If it is possible to save fallen humanity by any other means, then let Me forgo drinking this cup; but if they can be saved only in this way, even this I am willing to endure for them. I love them even more than my own life.*

Jesus is here facing a death that involves no nails or crown of thorns, but rather a “cup.” The symbolic cup, which He holds to His quivering lips, explains the mystery of His soul agony. With perhaps the most frightening language of all of Scripture, the apostle John defines the cup. It is “the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of His indignation” (Revelation 14:10). In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus is beginning to experience the wrath of God “without mixture,” meaning full strength, undiluted justice without a single tinge of mercy added to water down the force of its potency. He is entering the dark realm of that “death” which is “the wages of sin” (Romans 6:23). Tremblingly, He ventures into the mental and emotional suffering which is inherent in wrongdoing, and which no human being has ever had to face on his own account due to the shielding mercy of God. Acute consciousness of the bridgeless chasm that exists between God’s love-infused righteousness and mankind’s self-absorbed sinfulness intensifies within Him. And – horror of all horrors – He senses in His inmost soul that He is moving over to the wrong side of the chasm by taking our sin into Himself. “He [God the Father] hath made Him [the Son] to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

On our behalf, He alone is the guilty One. He is bowed down under the condemnation of every evil motive and deed, every hateful feeling, every ugly thought, every rape and murder, every act of child abuse, every war and holocaust, every sin of every person who has ever or will ever live. In His conscience He feels the tormenting blows of shame and self-aborrence that sin imposes on the soul as its ultimate exaction. Prostrate upon His face, the Son of God is enveloped in the impenetrable darkness of our rebellion. Hopeful thoughts of His resurrection, of which He has previously spoken with such confidence, begin to fade from view, receding to the other side of the darkness. Yet, He does not relent, although He would later tell Peter that He could, at any time, call more than twelve legions of angels to His rescue (see Matthew 26:53). His back is not against a wall. His soul is not held to the flame by a forceful hand beyond His control. He is free to love or to hate, to embrace or abandon. And that freedom to choose puts His love to the ultimate test.

As Messiah struggles and prays, reaching upward to His Father and downward to fallen humanity, there is an unspoken question that hangs heavy in the atmosphere: “Does The Son of God love others more than Himself? When faced with the ultimate decision to preserve self at the loss of others or to save others at the loss of self, what will the divine One choose?”

The Son of God is at liberty to abandon humanity to eternal destruction in order to keep His own life, or He may lay hold of our salvation at the expense of His own life. The good news of the gospel here emerges in all its healing, for the strength of His love leaves Him with one prevailing passion. No matter where this path of suffering leads, He cannot leave us to perish. His decision is made: He will save mankind at any cost to Himself. He cannot do otherwise, for the essence of His character is selfless love.

Luke's gospel informs us that God did send an angel to Christ in His Gethsemane agony, not to deliver, however, but to strengthen Him to drink the cup of suffering even to its bitter dregs (Luke 22:43). The implication is clear: Jesus would have died in the Garden and never reached Calvary had not the angel intervened with words of encouragement. The most intense suffering was yet to come. As the mob approached, led by Judas the betrayer, Christ aroused with regained composure, knowing that the darkest hours of His sacrifice, and the brightest revelation of His love, were just ahead.

"And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified Him" (Luke 23:33).

The Gospels record no word of complaint from Christ, not even an agonizing cry, as they drove the nails through His hands and feet. In my early understanding of the cross, I assumed that this was a demonstration of great self-control on His part. Actually it was not self-control that held His tongue as they tortured His body. Rather, it was the reality of a lesser pain eclipsed by a greater pain. What they were doing to His body was nothing compared to what He was going through in His heart and mind. The physical pain was horrible, no doubt. But it was superceded by the soul agony He felt as He became guilty before God of all human iniquity.

Upon the cross, bearing the weight of the sin of the whole world, the saviour cries out from His inmost soul, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). Here is the real sacrifice. Here is the true suffering of the Son of God. Here is the death from which He had sought release in the garden, and yet willingly walked into our eternal salvation. Here is the crescendo revelation of divine Love. "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?"

Hanging between heaven and earth, Jesus feels, with acute sensitivity, the separation that sin will ultimately make between God and unrepentant sinners. Christ alone bears it. No one else, not one person in all of history, has ever experienced the full wages of sin. All divine justice has always been mixed with mercy. But now, the Son of the Father endures the horrific trauma of complete separation from His Father. The feelings of guilt are so consuming, the condemnation so dark and so completely pervasive, that He feels utterly "forsaken," forever abandoned and rejected by the Father. No hopeful thoughts of resurrection morning are seen through the encompassing guilt. He cannot see through the darkness to the other side of the tomb. All he can feel is the heart-shattering condemnation of sin.

Psalm eighty-eight is a remarkable prophecy of the suffering, dying Saviour. With disquieting clarity it peers into the internal workings of the mind and emotions of Christ as He hung upon the cross. Take a deep breath and read:

“O Lord, God of My salvation, I have cried out day and night before You [are You hearing Me?]. Let My prayer come before You; incline Your ear to my cry [are You there?]. For My soul is full of troubles, and My life draws near to the grave. I am counted with those who go down to the pit; I am like a man who has no strength [the stress of this experience is draining Me of all energy], adrift among the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom You remember no more [a death from which there is no apparent return], and who are cut off [eternally separated] from Your [sustaining hand]. You have laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the depths. Your wrath lies heavy upon Me, and You have afflicted Me with all Your waves [Your abandonment and rejection are pounding upon My soul like the waves of a raging ocean]....I am shut up [confined in the soul darkness], and I cannot get out [I cannot see any way of resurrection from this oblivion into which I sink].....Shall the dead arise and praise You [will there be a resurrection from the death I am dying]?...[from] the place of destruction?...Lord, why do You cast off [abandon] My soul [My very life]?...I suffer Your terrors have cut Me off” (Psalm 88, NKJV; selected verses).

The forsakenness Christ felt on the cross is here graphically portrayed so that we might know the cost of our redemption. It is evident from this messianic passage that Jesus entered a period of severe testing, during which the true character of His love would be proven or conquered. Enveloped within the impenetrable darkness of guilt, He could not see beyond His death to the other side of the tomb – “I am shut up, and I cannot get out.” Crushed under the weight of our sin, the bright hope of resurrection morning eluded His grasp. Faced with the bleak prospect of eternal separation from His Father, still He did not shrink back. He made the conscious choice to value our eternal life more than His own. If it meant that He would never again enjoy the pleasure of His Father’s presence, so be it. Even that fate He was willing to endure for our salvation.

The agonizing cry of Jesus, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” is just one sentence from a more detailed prophecy of His struggle. Psalm twenty-two traces the suffering Messiah’s internal conflict through to its victorious conclusion. While He entered into the jaws of hopeless despair, benighted by the darkness of complete separation from God, His undying love emerged triumphant by faith in His Father’s good character.

Follow as His mind convulses back and forth between between despair and faith:

Despair: “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me? Why art Thou so far from helping Me....I cry...but Thou hearest not.”

Faith: "But Thou art holy....Our fathers trusted in Thee: they trusted, and Thou didst deliver them. They cried unto Thee, and were delivered: they trusted in Thee, and were not confounded."

Despair: "But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people....They shake the head, saying, He trusted on the Lord that He would deliver Him: let Him deliver Him, seeing He delighted."

Faith: "But Thou art He that took Me out of the womb: Thou didst make Me hope when I was upon My mother's breasts. I was cast upon Thee from the womb: Thou art My God from My mother's belly. Be not far from Me; for trouble is near; for there is none to help."

Despair: "I am poured out like water, and all My bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of My bowels. My strength is dried up....Thou hast brought Me to the dust of death... ..The wicked have enclosed Me: they pierced My hands and feet... ..They part My garments among them, and cast lots upon My vesture."

Faith: "But be not Thou far from Me, O Lord: O My strength, haste Thee to help Me. Deliver My soul.....Save from the lion's mouth."

At this point in the Saviour's struggle, faith gains the ascendancy and triumphs over despair. The feelings of God-forsakenness are strong, but He is fully resolved to save fallen mankind at any cost to Himself and trust His own future to His Father.

Triumphant Faith: "I will declare Thy name [character] unto My brethren.....Ye that fear the Lord, praise Him.....glorify Him....For He hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither hath He [the Father] hid His face from Him [the Son]; but when He cried unto Him, He heard.....Your heart shall live forever.....None can keep alive his own soul" (Psalm 22).

Even when faced with the terrifying possibility of an eternal, God-forsaken death, knowing that He could abandon fallen man and save Himself at any moment, the Son of God continued to trudge forward into the darkness with self-forgetful determination. The devastating prospect of never-ending separation from His Father did not alter His decision to ransom the rebellious children whom He loved more than His own soul. Once the trial was borne through to its zenith - where the highest love and the deepest selfishness stood face to face and love gained the victory - then the assurance of the Father's acceptance again encircled His beloved Son. In the trusting sigh, "Father, into Thy hands do I commend My spirit," we catch the glimmers of a victorious faith in the goodness of God. "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" gave way to "He hath not despised nor abhorred [Me as I felt]neither hath He hid His face....[My] heart shall [after all] live forever."

"This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1John 4:10, NIV).

At the cross of Christ we stand as breathless spectators witnessing the self-forgetful majesty of a love that is beyond our comprehension. So deep, so strong, so utterly selfless and unlike

ourselves is this love that we are tempted to deny its existence. But if we will believe and not deny, its existence will be proved by the influence it will exert over our hard, selfish hearts. By believing that the Christ of Calvary is, in truth, the revelation of the Father's character, sin loses its power over us. Our guilty hearts are bathed in the healing light that streams forth from the Cross, awakening within us a reciprocal love of like character. For it is truly "an atoning sacrifice," making our hearts one with His.

Tears swell in my eyes and adoration surges in my heart as the true significance of the Saviour's sacrifice dawns within me. How could He love me so deeply, so passionately, so selflessly? Is this really what God is like? Can it truly be that the Almighty is so incredibly beautiful? Calvary answers with resounding *Yes!*

Our experiment is now complete. Assess your thoughts and feelings in the glorious light of God's love. How do you feel towards sin? What are your thoughts about God? Do you sense in your heart the awakening of an indomitable power to love and serve such a Lord? Do you feel arousal of adoration and reverence? Do you find yourself stunned, perhaps even pained, by the radical beauty of God's character?

If so, then say *Yes* to revelation. Say *Amen* to the love of your Maker. Say *Yes, I do believe that God is truly as good as the cross of Christ says He is.*