

Drinking the Father's cup

«Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?» (John 18:11 ESV)

Many churches still preserve the celebration of the most important festivities of the liturgical calendar, including those relating to the passion and death of Christ. The prominence of these events in the Gospels justifies that we give them special attention. We must not lose sight of the fact that our salvation revolves around the cross of Golgotha. Each detail recorded by the evangelists is charged with meaning. They impress, instruct and encourage.

On our part, we will consider the sufferings of the Saviour in the light of an impressive metaphor: the “cup” that Jesus had to drink. Before, however, we will consider a fact of paramount importance:

The cup of God's wrath hangs over sinners

The Scriptures, both the Old and the New Testament, show us unequivocally that God is the «judge of the earth who repays to the proud what they deserve» (Ps. 75:8; Ps. 94:2; Isa. 51:17; Jer. 25:15; Hab. 2:16). That cup is poured out on individuals and nations. Were it not for God's grace, we would all be subject to His condemning judgment, «for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God» (Rom. 3:23 ESV).

The words of the Lord Jesus Christ could not be more solemn: «unless you repent, you will all likewise perish» (Luke 13:3 ESV). The cup of God's righteous wrath is poured overall as every human being, because of our natural condition after the fall, is prone to drift away from God and to transgress His laws. In one way or another we become recalcitrant rebels. The apostle Paul states irrefutably: «you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds» (Col. 1:21 ESV). Will the cup finally tip over so that its contents will be poured out on us? That is not our Father's purpose!

The redemptive cup of Christ

To remedy the lost state of mankind, God sent His Son into the world to accomplish our redemption. The purpose of His coming was not simply that of a prophet who communicates a message from God. Christ, much more than a prophet, came to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10). Human beings were fallen into a deep, miry, fateful pit; and the Son of God wanted to descend to the bottom of that pit to rescue those who were in it. In everything except sin, He identified himself with them. He voluntarily became the representative of a sinful,

condemned humanity. The whole burden of sin, which ruined humans, was assumed by Him in order to redeem them. He came into the world to be «the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world» (John 1:29 ESV). And the only way to take it away was through His death. «Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God» (1 Pet. 3:18 ESV). What a wonder of love!

Such a prodigy moves us, especially when we consider that Jesus' sufferings on the cross were not only physical, although these were to be horribly intense, but moral and spiritual. Before God, He appeared as the representative of the human race. In an unprecedented way, He virtually “clothed himself” with our sins, with all that is intolerable in them in the eyes of the perfectly holy God. Therefore, the judgment that we deserved fell upon Him. «God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all» (Rom. 8:32 ESV). In a mysterious sense, Christ on the cross, in the eyes of God, appeared as the great “sinner of sinners”, the substitute for the authentic sinners. Can we imagine the moral agony that such a coating entailed?

The evangelists do not give us many details about Jesus' sufferings in His passion and death, but they do give us enough information to give us an idea of the horror of that experience. In Gethsemane the Lord «began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed» (Matt. 26:37 NKJV) and confessed: «My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death» (Matt. 26:38 NKJV) (and parallel passages). His was a sorrow without parallel. «And being in agony He prayed more earnestly; and His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground» (Luke 22:44 ESV). It is not surprising that He asked the heavenly Father for three times to be freed from His torment. In that hour of unspeakable agony, He knew that, burdened with the sins of the world, He was to suffer the most painful thing: to be abandoned by the Father. How pathetic His cry on the cross: «My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?» (Matt. 27:46 ESV). This was the bitterest ingredient in the cup that Jesus was to drink.

The apostles John and James answered very lightly when Jesus asked them: «Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?» They answered hastily: «We can» (Matt. 20:22 NIV). No human being can suffer like Christ. No one can give himself up to death to free one of his fellow men from judgment and condemnation.

Today, with more spiritual light, we know that we cannot. The passion and death of Jesus were unique. Our sufferings and our death are the result of our sin (Rom. 5:12). Those of Christ are those of the «good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep» (John 10:11 ESV). Despite the infinite distance between the Redeemer and the redeemed, to a certain extent and in some way, believers in Him are called to share His cup. Thus, Christ indicated to the two sons of Zebedee: «You will indeed drink from my cup» (Matt. 20:22-23 NIV).

The Christian's cup

Biblical texts often use the metaphor of the cup to express the joyful content of the believer's experience. The psalmist testified to this fact: «Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup... The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely, I have a delightful inheritance» (Ps. 16:5-6 NIV). Lord, «You prepare a table before me... you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows» (Ps. 23:5 ESV). The prophets also alluded to this blessing. In Zion there is «joy and gladness... thanksgiving and the voice of song» (Isa. 51:3 ESV). And the New Testament is replete with references to the joy of salvation enjoyed by the redeemed (John 15:11; John 16:24; Acts 13:52; Gal. 5:22).

However, the fact that the believer can find in the presence of God fullness of joy and pleasures at His right hand forever (Ps. 16:11) does not mean that the life of godliness is a continuous party, free from darkness and suffering. In the cup there are often bitter ingredients, some intensely painful. Many times there is a manifestation of our identification with Christ. He Himself warned His followers of false hopes: «If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me» (Matt. 16:24 ESV); «Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be My disciple» (Luke 14:27 ESV).

There is also suffering in the experience of our sanctification. When the believer allows himself forms of behaviour that are contrary to Christian holiness, God corrects him and, generally, the correction hurts, sometimes a lot (Heb. 12:4-11).

Likewise, suffering strengthens faith (1 Pet. 1:6-7). In the same letter, Peter exhorts us not to faint in the face of trials. Tribulations should not be a cause for surprise, but rather for joy, «you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy» (1 Pet. 4:12-13 NKJV).

Perhaps the most difficult thing to accept is the suffering caused by hard experiences in life: illness, family failure, loneliness, death of loved ones... These experiences darken faith with torturous doubts: Is the human being alone in the universe? Does his life have any meaning? Does prayer really “change things”? Does God hear me when I cry out to Him, feeling that He is hidden in the distance and silence? These questions are followed by another, the conclusive one: “Why is this happening to me?”

The answer that many come to is that the course of everything happening in our lives is the result of a destiny that is as blind as it is implacable. But the Scriptures, as well as the experience of many believers, gives us an illuminating answer, for it places all events within the framework of divine Providence. The little birds of the field find what they need for their sustenance because God feeds them (Matt. 6:26). The hairs of our head are all numbered (Matt. 10:30); not a single one falls to the ground without His consent. And the apostle Paul sums up

the doctrine of Providence when he states that «for those who love God all things work together for good» (Rom. 8:28 ESV). This is true even in the cases where the cup of our life is extremely bitter. We must not forget that it is “the cup of the Father”, the God of all wisdom, power, mercy. I too must say with my Master: «Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?» (John 18:11 ESV). In the end, everything turns into a blessing. Usually, when our God has fulfilled the purpose for which He sent the test, He makes the fullness of His goodness shine forth. Such was Job's experience. It will also be ours if we remain firm in faith. And when the hour of liberation comes, we will be able to say with the psalmist: «For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light» (Ps. 36:9 ESV). One of God's wonderful works is that He «You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; You have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness» (Ps. 30:11 NKJV).

Faced with the cup that God has prepared for me, how do I react? With an attitude of reluctance? With resentment? By sliding into the depths of discouragement? With anger at the way God treats me?

There is only one sensible reaction: that of trustful submission to the divine will, without protest, without hesitation, taking the example of Jesus and pouring out in prayer the contents of my cup with all my pain, my trouble, my reluctance: «My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will... if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done» (Matt. 26:39, 42 ESV).

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The web **Christian Thought** gives information about the literary work of Dr. Pablo Martínez and his father Rev. José M. Martínez. Through this work the Christian thought of the authors flows covering a wide range of subjects; theological, psychological and ethical issues are considered from a biblical perspective with a relevant and practical application to current problems.

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