

FAITHFUL BELIEF AND FATAL UNBELIEF

by Ray C. Stedman

Many have noted that the Gospel of John does not have an account of the struggles of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. There are gnarled, ancient olive trees still growing in that garden today, and some of them may date back to the days of Jesus. One old tree may mark the exact spot where he knelt in prayer and great drops of bloody sweat dropped from his brow. Yet there is no account of this struggle in John's gospel. That seems strange, especially since John was one of the three disciples (the others were Peter and James) whom our Lord took with him on that evening. Perhaps, due to the fact that all three fell asleep and missed much of what occurred in the garden, John does not include an account of it.

In this twelfth chapter, however, John does include an incident which has sometimes been called "little Gethsemane," for it reflects the same agony of spirit felt by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. This incident occurred perhaps two days before the experience in the garden. Jesus has just declared the great law of the harvest which he recognized as true of himself -- "the grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die or it abides alone, but if it die it brings forth much fruit" -- and now our Lord goes on to say,

"Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name. Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'" {John 12:27-28 RSV}

What a strange, dramatic occurrence! I have read this account from the Revised Standard Version, and it presents the prayer of Jesus as a question: "What shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?'" The text adds, "No, for this purpose I have come to this hour." While this can be read in that way, I do not believe it was what John intended to be read. In the original text the word, "No," does not appear. I believe Jesus uttered a genuine prayer to be delivered from the pain and the agony of the cross, which he sees looming immediately ahead. He was facing a terrible ordeal. He had no illusions of how dreadful it would be.

A comparison of this account with the accounts of Gethsemane in the other gospels reveals a close parallel. The words in John, "Now is my soul troubled," are paralleled by the cry in Gethsemane, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death," {Matt 26:38, cf, Mark 14:34}. Compare also the words, "Father, save me from this hour," with what he said in the garden, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me," {Matt 26:39}. Here he says, "For this purpose I have come to this hour," while in Gethsemane he said, "If this cup can not pass unless I drink it, thy will be done," {Matt 26:42}. Here again he says, "Father, glorify thy name," while in the garden he said, "The cup which my Father has given me, shall I not drink it?" {John 18:11}. Here we read that a voice came from heaven to encourage and strengthen him, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again," while in Gethsemane we read that after his agony and his bloody sweat an angel came and strengthened him.

I'm not saying that we have here John's version of the Garden of Gethsemane -- these are obviously two separate occasions -- but what it does teach us is that the mental torture our Lord felt as he saw the approaching hurt, agony, shame and humiliation of the cross was felt over a long, extended period. It came not just once but several times.

We must not let ourselves forget the fearful agony which Jesus went through: the bloody sweat; the three times he prayed to the Father for help; the betraying hurt of the traitor's kiss; the subsequent arrest by the temple guard; his appearance in shame and humiliation as a criminal before the high priests and before King Herod; the cruel mockery, and scornful contempt when he was dressed as a king and a crown of thorns placed upon his head; the scourging at the whipping post upon Pilate's command; the agony of the cross; the nails through his hands and feet; the spear through his side; and, above all, the terrible torment that drew from him the awful cries of anguish as his spirit endured shame and humiliation and the separation from the face of the Father that bearing the world's sin required him to pass through. Jesus saw the horror of the hell that was coming. That is

what he means by these words, "Now is my soul troubled."

After he had said this, for the third time in the ministry of Jesus, the voice of God spoke from the heavens:

The crowd standing by heard it and said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. "Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." He said this to show by what death he was to die. {John 12:29-33 RSV}

He had no illusions about what was coming, and undoubtedly he was encouraged to hear the Father's voice confirming that he was on the right course. This voice had first been heard at the baptism of Jesus. I have always felt that was God's confirmation of the purity and sinlessness of our Lord before his public ministry began. Skeptics sometimes suggest that Jesus was probably as guilty of sin and failure in the silent years before his public ministry as any other man, thereby implying that his sinlessness is merely a theological illusion. That claim is answered by the voice of God at the baptism, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," {Matt 3:17}. This is our guarantee that through all those years there was no vestige of disobedience or failure on our Lord's part.

Then the divine voice was heard again at the transfiguration, on a spur of Mount Hermon, a few weeks before the final week in Jerusalem. Our Lord was suddenly transformed as Peter, James and John watched, and Moses and Elijah appeared to talk with Jesus. With typical impetuosity, Peter suggested that they build three tabernacles, one each for Moses, Elijah and Jesus, as though they were all equals. Once again the voice of God broke through and declared the superior ministry of Jesus to all the prophets and leaders who had appeared beforehand in Israel, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!" {Matt 17:5 RSV}. And now, for the third time, as he faced the ordeal of the cross the voice of the Father affirms his pleasure at the faithfulness of his beloved Son who was willing to endure what lay before him. God declares that from this ordeal will come further glory to his name.

Jesus explains by listing three things which that glory will consist of:

First, "Now is the judgment of this world." In the cross men will be able to see what is wrong with the philosophy of the world, what is evil in what sounds so right and necessary. Here the world's phony values are exposed. Here is revealed a standard by which the self-indulgence of the world may be measured, the destructive philosophy that cries out on every side today,

Live for yourself, for yourself alone,
for yourself and none beside,
Just as if Jesus had never lived
and as if he had never died.

But Jesus says that life must be put to death: "If any one serves me, let him deny himself; and take up his cross, daily, and follow me," {Luke 9:23}. You cannot be a Christian and continue to live on the basis that your life belongs to yourself. That is the life of the world. All of that is judged in the cross.

Secondly, Jesus declares, "Now shall the ruler of this world be cast out." Because we are continually victims of the deceptions of Satan we do not realize how total is his control of the human race. All men blindly follow demonic delusions that Satan sends into the world. We find ourselves manipulated by Satanic values and have no idea of how helpless we are to change, apart from Christ.

The devil is the prince, the ruler, of this world, the Scriptures declare. He is in control of human society. In a parable Jesus said, "If a strong man keeps his house his goods are at peace; until a stronger one comes, who will take his goods and divide them as he chooses," {cf, Luke 11:21}. This strong man is Satan, the stronger one is Jesus. The great word of the gospel is that when we believe in Jesus and follow him, we are freed from the power of Satan, transferred into the Kingdom of the Son of God's love. For the first time we can do something permanent about the habits that destroy us, hurting us and others, wrecking our plans and

sabotaging our highest hopes and dreams. In the cross the power of the devil over the human race was broken and deliverance to individuals was made possible.

Thirdly, Jesus says, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." You may have heard that text used to mean that if a preacher exalts Christ, everybody will be attracted to him. I wish it did mean that. As I have preached Christ, I have found that some were attracted to him, but not everybody. Some are driven away, thinking they have been listening to nonsense. Others are indifferent and could not care less.

No, that is not what these words mean. John tells us what they mean when he adds, "He said this to show by what death he was to die." These words of Jesus are clearly a reference to the cross: By means of the cross he would draw all men to himself. "Men," of course, also includes women. The name of our race is "mankind," which has nothing to do with gender or sex. But what does Jesus mean by "all men"? He probably means, all kinds of men -- rich or poor, black, white, yellow and red, children and adults, no matter what social standing or background, no matter how deeply one had fallen into sin -- all kinds are drawn to the cross and can be delivered and saved. What a wonderful word of hope, and how true it has proved to be. All kinds of people have come and found deliverance through the cross of Christ! It may very well be that is what Jesus means here, as that is how the word "all" is used in many places in the New Testament.

There is one sense, however, in which this word means everybody without exception. I am referring to the judgment at the end of life. No one can escape Jesus of Nazareth. He stands at the end of every path. Though we may neglect him and be indifferent to him now, there will come a day when we will have to face him. Paul said as much to the intelligentsia of Athens: "God has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead," {Acts 17:31 RSV}. That may be what Jesus meant here.

The reaction of the crowd constitutes a remarkable study in unbelief:

The crowd answered him, "We have heard from the law that the Christ remains for ever. How can you say that the Son of man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of man?" Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, lest the darkness overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light."

When Jesus had said this, he departed and hid himself from them. {John 12:34-36 RSV}

Many ask why the Jews failed to recognize who Jesus was. If he did such wonderful signs, and fulfilled so clearly the prophecies of the Old Testament, why did they fail to recognize him? Many Jews today raise the same question as these Jews of Jesus' day.

The answer, given in these verses, is a study of the steps of unbelief:

The first step is to exercise a selective faith, a faith that believes some, but not all, of the word of God. "The crowd answered him, 'We have heard from the law that the Christ remains for ever.'" There are passages from Isaiah, from Daniel and from Zechariah and others that clearly state that once the Messiah appeared, he would remain as God's chosen forever. Other passages predict that he would come as a Deliverer who would lead Israel to victory. This crowd had read these passages and had chosen to believe passages such as Isaiah 9,

**For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government will be upon his shoulder,
and his name will be called
"Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end. {Isa 9:6-7a RSV}**

On hearing that, the Jews of Jesus' day (and of our own) say, "That is our Messiah!" That is what they were saying here: "That is our idea of the Messiah. What do you mean 'the Son of man must be lifted up?'" They understood what Jesus meant: they knew he was referring to the cross. "Who is this Son of man?" they asked. "He is not the one we know."

Many today fall into the same trap. There is probably no more common example of unbelief than that many people -- even some Christians -- exhibit when they say, "God promised that he would give me a sense of peace, of release and joy within" (and there are such promises in Scripture), "but I have tried to claim those promises but they don't work." Those who say that have little idea of the great insult they are paying God. What they are really saying is that God is faithless to his word; God does not keep his promises; God is a liar.

The problem is, they believe only part of the Scripture. The Bible says that God is faithful, that he cannot and does not lie. History confirms that God fulfills his promises to the very letter. If we don't see them fulfilled, it's not because God has failed, it's because there is something wrong with us. We are not seeing everything involved. We don't understand ourselves. There is a darkness inside us that we don't even know is there. That is the problem. Rather than blaming God, we should ask ourselves where we have gone wrong, or what it is we cannot see. We must bring that question to God, who will enlighten us. That is his business -- to give light!

As a second step of unbelief, these Jews missed their present opportunity. Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, lest the darkness overtake you." As far as we can determine, this was the crowd's last opportunity to hear the words of Jesus. He never spoke to the multitudes again. After he had spoken these words he hid himself. When he next appears he is with his disciples in the privacy of the Upper Room. This was an hour of special opportunity; the crowd had a last chance to change. Jesus tells them, "Walk while you have the light." When God is speaking, while his word is illuminating your mind, when you begin to see reality from God's perspective, that is a critical hour. Seize it! Don't let it pass. Act on it. Yet they let their opportunity pass.

Like many today, they failed to act on what they saw in a moment of illumination. I've done this and you've done it. We all have failed in this way. It is part of the process of unbelief.

Thirdly, they did not realize their present condition. Here Jesus defines darkness: "He who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going." Have you ever been in pitch black darkness, in a room you had never been in before? You stumbled around, bumping into furniture, walking into the walls, hurting yourself, because you could not see where you were going. You were, to all intents and purposes, blind. In a moral sense this is also true. Many people don't know where they're going; they don't understand what will happen to them down the road because of their present actions.

Don't you know people who blindly do hurtful things to themselves? Why would anyone, for instance, start using drugs when it is so clear today where it leads? Yet some, especially young people, take cocaine or heroin and hurt and destroy themselves in the process. That is moral darkness. Millions, not realizing their present condition, are walking in such darkness today.

Fourthly, these Jews around Jesus were ignorant of a tremendously important spiritual law. Jesus said, "While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light." To act on truth changes you. If you act on the truth that you now know, you will become a truthful person; you will become realistic, you will begin to live realistically.

The opposite is true also, as we see all around us. You become what you do. Society doesn't seem to understand this, but it's true. If you practice lying, you will become a liar. No one will believe you, even when you do tell the truth. If you start drinking often, and to excess, you will become an alcoholic. If you give in to your every craving soon you will discover that you are the slave and victim of the very thing you hate. If you criticize you, will end up a hardhearted cynic who looks at life through dark glasses. It is a spiritual law which no one can avoid.

But it is equally true that if you respond to the light you will become enlightened. Not only that, you will

become a light, so that others watching you will learn to see reality. Jesus is dealing here with critically important issues that touch us at the very deepest level of our existence. This is no mere theological twaddle, designed for Sunday morning entertainment. It is a foundational and formative law which is no respecter of persons.

The fifth step immediately follows: The crowd lost their last opportunity. "When Jesus had said this, he departed and hid himself from them." They no longer had a chance to believe.

That is what John goes on to declare. The 12th chapter of John could very well end at this point, as a record of what Jesus did in his ministry. There is no record of any further ministry on his part to the multitudes. The rest of this chapter is John's commentary on Jewish unbelief.

He adds two postscripts to show, first, that the unbelief of the crowd had been predicted by the prophet Isaiah 700 years earlier:

**Though he had done so many signs before them,
yet they did not believe in him; it was that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might
be fulfilled:**

**"Lord, who has believed our report,
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"
Therefore they could not believe. For Isaiah again said,
"He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart,
lest they should see with their eyes
and perceive with their heart,
and turn for me to heal them."**

Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke of him. {John 12:27-41 RSV}

In this amazing passage John quotes two sections from the prophet Isaiah. The first is from the well known 53rd chapter, which depicts the Suffering Servant:

**But he was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed. {Isa 53:5 RSV}**

That chapter begins with these words, "Lord, who has believed our report, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" Here the prophet is expressing his surprise at the blindness and deafness of people. "How can this be?" he asks. God's words had been delivered to the people, but they did not heed them. They had also ignored the Lord's mighty arm by which he had done wonderful signs. "To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" Now John declares that these words of Isaiah were being fulfilled, 700 years later when Messiah had come, and said these wonderful words, and done these great deeds, but the people had turned a deaf ear to all he had to say.

The second quotation is taken from another well known section of Isaiah, the sixth chapter, which describes the vision of the glory of Jehovah:

**In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted
up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings:
with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.
And one called to another and said,
"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory." {Isa 6:1-3 RSV}**

Isaiah was sent back to the people but was warned by God, "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they should see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and turn for me to heal them," {cf, Isa 6:10}. Many have misunderstood this because it sounds as though it is God's fault that the people don't believe. And that is what the passage says. There is no use to try and explain it away. The passage clearly claims that God prevents people from believing.

The problem is that people take that idea and say that it is true from the beginning, that God chooses some to save and others whom he will not save, and that it doesn't matter what they do, God will not let them hear -- he hardens their hearts and blinds their eyes so they cannot see and believe. But that fails to see that this is referring to the law of the spirit that declares that what you persist in doing is what you will become.

You can demonstrate this in your own life if you care to. Tie your arm to your body and leave it tied, unmovable, for a week. When you untie it you will find that you can hardly move it; it will have lost its ability to function, not because God wants people to lose their arm function. No, but God determined the law that says, "use it or lose it." That is what this means. It is also true of moral life. If you don't exercise faith when you have the opportunity you will gradually lose the ability to do so, until there will come a day when you cannot exercise faith. By the law of nature, then, God has hardened your heart and blinded your eyes. Having chosen that, that is what you become. If you refuse to act on truth, you will finally lose the ability to recognize it. It has been said,

There is a line by us unseen, that crosses every path,
The hidden boundary between God's patience and his wrath.

So John adds in Verse 41, "Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke of him." What an amazing declaration of the deity of Jesus! I have used this with cultists, Jehovah Witnesses particularly, who deny that Jesus is God. Here John says that Isaiah the prophet saw the greatness of Yahweh when his glory filled the temple with angelic beings bowing before him, crying, "Holy, holy, holy," and John declares that that Being was Jesus. "Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke of him." Clearly John applies this to Jesus himself.

That is why he concludes this account with two sections that speak of the incredible importance of exercising faith in Christ when you learn the truth about him.

First:

Nevertheless many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God. {John 12:42-43 RSV}

Here is a form of belief which John says is not real belief at all, it is only head knowledge. Some know certain facts about Jesus but they don't act on them. They don't commit themselves and dare to stand for them in the face of the opposition of their friends. Jesus Christ is so central to history, so surely Lord of heaven and earth, that no one can afford to ignore him. If you try to live without him by merely paying lip service to him, in the end you will discover you have betrayed yourself. You will find that the praise of men, and the fear of men, has misled you into final darkness.

The words of Jesus which follow were not uttered on this occasion (remember that he had hidden himself from the crowd), but are rather a summary of what he had already said during his ministry.

And Jesus [had] cried out and said, "He who believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. And he who sees me sees him who sent me." {John 12:44-45 RSV}

When you deal with Jesus you are dealing with God. Jesus reveals God; he unveils reality.

"I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness." {John 12:46 RSV}

Jesus is the unveiler of the way things really are. To heed him is to deal with the central fact of life.

"If any one hears my sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to Judge the world but to save the world." {John 12:47 RSV}

Judgment does not fall on us immediately when we disbelieve. When you hear the words of Jesus and you ignore them, Jesus does not punish you for that. He didn't come to chastise you; he came to save you. He gives you opportunity to hear, again and again, that you might awaken and respond to him. But, though judgment does not come immediately, it will come, as he goes on to say:

"He who rejects me and does not receive my sayings has a judge; the word that I have spoken will be his judge on the last day." {John 12:48 RSV}

Sometimes people ask, "What about those who have never heard?" But that is not the real issue. God does not condemn us for what we have not heard, but for ignoring what we have heard. The final judge is the word we have heard, the sayings of Jesus we already know. This means that those who are condemned on that day are self-condemned. They stand silent before the throne, rendered speechless by their guilty knowledge of truth they have not obeyed.

Jesus' last word is to remind his hearers of the authority behind all he says.

"For I have not spoken on my own authority; the Father who sent me has himself given me commandment what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has bidden me." {John 12:49-50 RSV}

The issue is life itself, the most crucial issue any individual will ever face.

The other day we had an electrical problem develop at our house when a circuit breaker kept cutting off electricity from several important appliances. At first we thought this was due to an overloaded circuit, so we began to turn off certain appliances while we carefully monitored the circuit. But to no avail. It actually got worse, so that even one operating appliance tripped the circuit and we had to keep switching it back on every few minutes. We began to think the circuit breaker itself was faulty. Finally I checked the box very carefully and discovered that one wire leading into the circuit breaker was touching another wire. Although the wires were insulated, when I pulled them apart I found that the insulation had been eaten through so that current was leaking through and short-circuiting the circuit breaker.

As I repaired the wires, I thought of the parallel to the operation of faith. We all have a capacity for faith -- we all can believe truth when we hear it and know it to be truth -- but frequently some misuse leaks the faith away. We insist on some compromise, we cover our eyes and will not admit something is wrong, and faith drains away till the circuit breaker of natural law turns off the flow of God's power.

The question John leaves us with is this: Is something draining your faith? Are you unable to lay hold of the great and glorious promises of the gospel because there is some area where you are deceiving yourself, where you are clinging to something the Scripture clearly says is wrong? Perhaps you are refusing to enter a relationship God wants you to have, or to lay hold of some opportunity he sets before you.

Where are you closing your eyes to truth? That is the issue.

Eventually that will lead at last to the question of your ultimate destiny before God.

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