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**Beholding the Mystery of
Jesus' Death and Resurrection**

Thabiti M. Anyabwile



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Captivated

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To Afiya,

our firstborn daughter,

born to survive.

You bring us such joy.

May you thrive in your knowledge of Jesus
and find your highest happiness in Him.

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Introduction

Parents teach their young children not to stare. “It’s not polite,” we say. “Don’t point.” Eventually we socialize our children into the habit of making eye contact—but not for too long. We teach them not to gaze upon others and to feel awkward or suspicious if other people stare at them. We make ourselves and our children expert glancers, visual skimmers, ocular snapshot takers.

I wonder if this cultural habit affects our ability to peer into matters that deserve a long look. How, for instance, does our aversion to staring at others affect our ability to behold the face of the Lord? Might we be conditioned to steal quick peeks at Jesus without tracing with the eyes of faith the thorn-induced scars on His brow, the lash-transferred welts on His back, or the nail-inflicted piercings in His hands and feet?

How would our knowledge of Jesus, our friendship with Him, and our familiarity with His ways be deepened if we looked long at Him? If we learned to stare, gaze, behold—look at Him and what He has done?

I believe the Bible implores and commands us to take a long look at Jesus. From Isaiah’s “Behold your God!”

(40:9), to the psalmist's "taste and see that the Lord is good" (34:8), to Jesus' own invitation to "take My yoke" (Matt. 11:29), the Scriptures find diverse ways to beckon the faithful to a luxuriant look at the Son of God.

Perhaps the Scriptures most forcefully beckon us to "come and see" when various writers ask profound questions in connection with Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Those questions drive us to consider not just the events themselves but also their meaning. The Scriptures question us so that we might look beneath the surface to find more of the never-ending treasures of Christ.

When Jesus asks that the cup of God's wrath be passed from Him, what does it mean when the Father remains silent? How should we understand the Lord's cry from the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" When the apostle Paul asks rhetorically, "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?" (1 Cor. 15:55), and the angel asks the women at the tomb, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5), what are we meant to know about the defeat of death and the Christian hope? What might we know about knowledge itself, our epistemology, when we consider the two travelers to Emmaus asking the resurrected Lord, "Do you not know these things?" (Luke 24:18).

Genuine contemplation of these questions requires we set aside our early lessons about politeness for a while and stare into the mystery of the cross and resurrection. What follows is an attempt to do just that—to stare at Jesus and be captivated by Him. I pray these meditations, originally a series of Easter sermons I preached at First

Baptist Church of Grand Cayman, help lock our eyes on Jesus. As we are transfixed, may we find that He has been looking upon us all along. May we behold His face and be satisfied as we're changed from one degree of glory to another in Him.



Is There No Other Way?

Jesus prayed, “O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done.”

—MATTHEW 26:42

“Is there no other way?” It’s the kind of question we ask when life reaches its most difficult points: when a long, slow illness steals the strength and vitality of a loved one; when a deeply troubled marriage stands on the cliff of divorce; when a desperate search for work, food, and shelter results only in hunger and homelessness or crime and begging; when an addiction becomes a fast track to rock bottom and despair; when depression closes in and makes the whole world dark...again. In these times, the question sneaks into our minds and sometimes escapes our lips: “Is there no other way?” Have you ever asked God that question?

When the brokenness of this world and our lives reaches its most intense, most threatening moments, we are tempted to think we are the only ones who have asked that question or felt that sorrow. But would it surprise you to know that you are not alone? Even God the Son in His incarnate life on earth at His point of greatest agony asked that question: “Is there no other way?”

The truth of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection is a daily reality for those who believe in Him. Yet from time to time, that daily reality requires extended contemplation and reflection, and we should ponder its meaning so that it does not become daily neglected. Christians need deeper glimpses into the mystery of God and His salvation. We need times of slow, contemplative consideration of the wonder of Christ's work for us. To do so, we begin with a question inspired by events in the garden of Gethsemane as they are recorded in Matthew 26. We begin by pondering a question hurting people have asked throughout the ages: "Is there no other way?"

As we ponder this question, we find that God's one perfect will accomplishes far more than all our imagined alternatives. A no from God does more for our good than a yes to all our dreams.

A New Experience for the Son of God

In Matthew 26, Jesus faces impending betrayal. He retreats to a somewhat secluded garden called Gethsemane. This is one of the rare occasions in the entire New Testament when we learn something of Jesus' mental state. In verse 37, Matthew tells us Jesus "began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed."

Being "sorrowful and deeply distressed" was a new experience for Jesus. Jewish religious leaders had tried to capture and kill Him on several previous occasions, but He seemed undaunted. The "time had not yet come," so the Lord passed through those attempts on His life like ships sailing through mists. But Gethsemane is different.

God the Son, the Son of God, feels sorrowful and very heavy. Jesus says in verse 38, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death.”

Those words probably shook and shocked Peter, James, and John. The disciples had never heard the Master speak this way about death—about anything. In fact, Jesus had taught them that He came in order to be killed for sins and to rise again. He had even rebuked Peter for protesting against that teaching. But that was when His time had not yet come. Now the time *has* come, and Jesus faces the hour of betrayal and death. The Lord tells us He could die from the overwhelming sorrow He feels.

Have you ever been so sorrowful and troubled that you thought the sorrow itself might kill you? Have you ever been so grieved of soul you thought you could curl into a fetal position and pass away?

Jesus is so troubled that He reaches out to His friends for support: “Stay here and watch with Me” (v. 38). His sleepy friends make His sorrow worse when they fail His small request to watch and pray (vv. 40, 43). They didn’t pray *with* Him, nor did they pray *for* Him. They slept right up to the moment of His betrayal (v. 45). Our Lord had to awaken His friends so they wouldn’t sleep through His betrayal. Have you ever been troubled, and your friends let you down in your hour of need?

During this nighttime solitary vigil, Jesus asks the Father three times, “Is there any way other than what’s ahead?”

He went a little farther and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me”...

Again, a second time, He went away and prayed, saying, “O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me unless I drink it, Your will be done.”...

So he left them, went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. (vv. 39, 42, 44)

At Jesus’ baptism, the voice from heaven said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). At our Lord’s transfiguration, Heaven spoke and said again, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!” (Matt. 17:5). Heaven had always answered prayers from the Son of God. But in Gethsemane, there is only the stony silence of the cold desert night. Heaven closes its mouth and refuses to speak aloud. Jesus asks, “Is there any other way?” In the silence comes an answer: “No, this is the only way.” To look more deeply into this mystery, we must ask, “*Why* is this the only way?” For the following reasons, the Father’s no and the cross are absolutely necessary.

We Need a High Priest Who Can Identify with Us

Jesus must be able to identify with our weaknesses in order to represent us before God. The Lord faces the most significant and troubling moment of His earthly life and endures the sorrow He feels because He must enter into our weakness.

Hebrews 4:15 tells us why Jesus shares our humanity: “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.” This sharing in our weakness was absolutely necessary. Hebrews 2:17 teaches, “Therefore, in

all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God.” Our Lord had to embrace our flesh in order to represent us to God.

Sometimes when we suffer, we can tell if our comforters have ever really endured what we are experiencing. We can tell by their words—they tend to talk too much or to share clichés. We can tell by their attitudes—they tend to be impatient with our grief. We can tell by their actions—they tend to move too quickly to the next thing and forget us in our suffering.

We do not need a high priest like our human comforters—unmoved, impatient, forgetful. We need a High Priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses. We need a representative before God the Father who will be merciful and faithful to us.

We must not miss the Bible’s crucial teaching at this point. In order for us to have the sympathizing, merciful, and faithful High Priest who knows what our lives are like and who never leaves us nor forsakes us, the Son of God *had* to be made like us and endure our sorrow. He *had* to take on our humanity, share in our temptation, and taste our suffering. This is why when Jesus prays, “Can you remove this cup?” and “Is there another way?” the Father answers with a loving, tender, and silent, “No—this is the only way for You to become their perfect High Priest.”

Now that Jesus has become such a High Priest for Christians, Hebrews 4:16 encourages us: “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” The trouble

and sorrow of Gethsemane and Calvary open the grace and help of the throne.

To Reveal That the Father Is Compassionate

If we want to know God the Father and understand His character, we must study Jesus. As we see Jesus in agony in Gethsemane, we must not forget we are also seeing the Father's character.

In Matthew 11:27 Jesus says, "All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, *and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him*" (emphasis added). Do you see? We cannot know the Father unless the Son reveals Him to us. And Jesus' entire life—whether He is in miraculous power or garden brokenness—reveals the Father. The Son is "the brightness of [the Father's] glory and the express image of His person" (Heb. 1:3).

So what are we witnessing when we see Jesus facedown on the ground, sorrowful and troubled, asking the Father if He must drink the cup of God's judgment? When we watch Jesus, we see the moving and dynamic unveiling of the Father's heart. Jesus reveals to us a heavenly Father who is not far off from us or unconcerned about our needs and suffering. The Father is not remote and unmoved. The Father is sorrowful and troubled too. Weeping and sorrowful, Jesus dramatically reveals to us what is meant in 2 Corinthians 1:3 when God is called "the Father of mercies and God of all comfort."

The One who cries out in the garden is not just the incarnate Son of God. Through the Son, the Father shows

us His mercy and love. Through the Son, the Father says, “I know what it’s like,” and He enters our suffering and takes it as His own. Because the Son suffered, we have both a sympathetic High Priest *and* an understanding and sympathetic heavenly Father. The no that Jesus receives is the yes to our salvation. The silent no reveals the Father’s love for us.

Sometimes in our suffering and trials, we fall into the trap of thinking, “Jesus knows all of my sorrows, but the Father”—and we mistakenly think “the real God”—“doesn’t care very much.” Have you ever thought or felt this way? If we think that way, we eventually begin to feel even farther away from God and Jesus. Have you ever noticed that?

The simple reason is this: If Jesus reveals the Father, and we think the Father is far off, then we will eventually feel Jesus is far off since Jesus and the Father are one. What we learn about Jesus gives us a window into the character of the Father. Jesus is touched with sorrow and trouble. Thus, He reveals a Father sorrowful over sin and brokenness. Jesus calls to the Father for what is best. The answer reveals a Father who gives only the best for His children—even if the answer is no and costs the life of His one and only Son.

There simply was no other way than the cross to reveal the truth that inspired these lyrics:

How deep the Father’s love for us,
How vast beyond all measure
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure

How great the pain of searing loss,
The Father turns His face away
As wounds which mar the chosen One,
Bring many sons to glory

At Gethsemane, we see the Father's compassionate heart in a prostrate Son. Along with His compassion, God is holy, so there is yet another reason Heaven answers no to Jesus' question.

Jesus Is the Only Possible Mediator between God and Man

We think of gardens as serene, peaceful places. We visit them to quietly enjoy beauty and reflection. However, in Gethsemane that night, bombs dropped and exploded. A spiritual war took place—a war between a holy God who hates sin and an unholy humanity that hates God. God and sinful man have been hostile toward one another since sin entered the world in Genesis 3. It's that way today. For even today, “the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be” (Rom. 8:7). The Bible wraps all the hostility between God and man in this question: “Is there another way?” Can anything other than the cross of Jesus Christ end the war between Omnipotence and depravity? Is there anyone who can step in and reconcile the two? Is there a mediator who can bring peace?

The answer comes to us from 1 Timothy 2:5–6: “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.” Or, as the apostles put

it in Acts 4:12: “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved.”

People often imagine they “can make peace with God.” People near death are often asked, “Have you made your peace with the Maker?” But peace with God cannot be negotiated. Our offense and war has been so long and protracted that we can’t simply say “uncle” and expect that His wrath or our hearts will be changed. We need someone to broker a truce—someone the Father trusts, someone who can represent God’s interests and our interests perfectly.

Only Jesus ends the war between God and man with a peaceful solution. If Jesus does not go to the cross, then God will win the war with a final and terrible judgment against man for his sin. Sinners cannot fight God and win. Having Jesus as our Mediator is the only way for us to be reconciled to God.

Only Jesus Could Make Atonement for Our Sin

The cup Jesus must drink is the cup of God’s wrath. God’s wrath is His totally righteous and pure anger and resolved action against evil and sin. It is His moral purity provoked by moral evil. The wrath of God is being revealed against all the ungodliness of men (Rom. 1:18).

In Gethsemane, Jesus faces *all* God’s wrath against *all* the evil and sin committed by *all* His people throughout *all* time.

Imagine, if you can, *all* the anger of God over *all* the sins ever committed by *all* His people who have ever lived

concentrated and poured *all* at once into a cup to drink. Is it any wonder the Savior confesses to being sorrowful and troubled even unto death?

But it must be this way. Consider again Hebrews 2:17. First, the writer explains that Jesus had to be made like us in every way in order to be our High Priest. But he gives a second reason the Lord had to be made like us and drink the cup: “to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” Humanity owes God a sacrifice. This “propitiation for sins,” or atonement, is the sacrifice that turns away the wrath of God. It is the kind of sacrifice that puts two divided parties “at one” again. Humanity owes this atonement, but we cannot supply it because of our sin and imperfection.

Good works will not atone for sin. “All our righteousnesses are like filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6) before our holy God. Animal sacrifices will not do. “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). Religious practices will not atone. Such regulations “are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh” (Col. 2:23).

Only a sinless, perfect offering could ever atone for the sins of the world. Unless Jesus, the perfect, spotless Lamb of God, drinks the cup of God’s wrath, every person will have to drink God’s judgment himself. Unless Jesus drinks the cup, every person will forever be separated from the love of God. There will be no escape and no reconciliation.

Jesus *must* drink the cup of God’s wrath—and He did. He drank all of it. So sinners may now rejoice with the truth of 1 John 4:10: “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” Do you feel ashamed that your sin

put the Son of God face down in the dirt, pleading for another way? Do you feel ashamed that your sin is so vile and wretched that there was no other way?

The Father said to the Son, “No, it must be this way,” so that His wrath would be propitiated—satisfied and turned away from sinners. The cross was the *only* way to atone for our sins. But the cross is not just about our needs. There is more to the cross even than that. The cross is mainly about God and His agenda.

To Prove the Father’s Righteousness

Did you know that until Gethsemane, Calvary, and the empty tomb, God’s righteousness was in question? Romans 3:24–26 tells us that “God set forth [Christ Jesus] as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

Why did God present Jesus Christ as a “propitiation,” or sacrifice of atonement? Was it only to save sinners? It was to save sinners, but it was also to achieve something more. God presented Jesus as an atoning sacrifice “to demonstrate His righteousness,” or prove His justice.

But why was that necessary? It was necessary “because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed.” All the sins before Jesus’ death on the cross had not yet been punished. God had passed them over. But at the same time God had accepted some

sinner as His own people. How could He accept some unpunished sinners as His own and reject other unpunished sinners at the same time? How could God do that and still be considered righteous? That was the problem created by God's salvation prior to the cross of Calvary.

And this was one reason the Father said no in Gethsemane. A cosmic contradiction needed to be put right. So God presented Jesus Christ as an atoning sacrifice "to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, *that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus*" (emphasis added). For all the centuries up until Jesus' incarnation and crucifixion, the Father had passed over the sins of His people. The people had offered up symbolic sacrifices, but those did not really atone for sin. They were shadows, not the reality.

Since the time of Adam's sin and Israel's redemption, a question had hung over God's head. The universe wondered how God could be righteous. When Jesus prayed in Matthew 26:42, "If this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it," the Father's justice, or righteousness, was at stake. If Jesus does not drink the cup and atone for sins, God will be proven to be unfair. As John Piper puts it, "This is the most significant problem in the universe." Is God unfair?

The one silent no in Gethsemane resounds in double duty in answer to the centuries-long question of whether God was fair to forgive. The cross proves that God is just in punishing sinners and in forgiving sinners who trust in

Jesus Christ. The cross was absolutely necessary in order to vindicate the righteousness of God. Without the cross, God remains open to the charge of unfairness and injustice. Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice paid the debt of all those who believed in God's promise of a coming salvation before Jesus' incarnation. By the same sacrifice, those who had faith before Christ's advent and those who have faith since find righteousness with God and righteousness in God. When Jesus asks if there is another way, the Father says, "No, because My righteousness must be upheld."

The Father and the Son's Glory Must Be Revealed

God's greatest motivation for all His actions is the revelation of His glory in the universe. Everything He does is to show to the creation His own perfect beauty and flawless attributes. This is supremely true with our Lord's cross. When Jesus asks if there is any other possible way, it is as if He is asking, "Is there another way to reveal Your glory more perfectly?" The answer cloaked in silence is no. The cross is the greatest possible revelation of the glory of God the Father and God the Son.

Consider the apostle John's account of Jesus' betrayal in chapter 13. Immediately after Judas left the Last Supper to betray Jesus, the Lord says to the disciples, "Now the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in Him. If God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and glorify Him immediately" (vv. 31–32). When Jesus announces that the hour has come, He not only means His betrayal is about to happen but also that *through* that betrayal, His crucifixion and resurrection, the hour for

the mutual glorification of Father and Son has arrived. So Jesus prays in John 17, “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You.... I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (vv. 1, 4–5).

The Father and Son agree to the crucifixion and resurrection as the ultimate means for each to bring the other the highest possible glory in the universe. Heaven remained silent in response to Jesus’ prayer in order to see this glory manifested. No more perfect way existed for the beauty, splendor, weightiness, and fame of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to be displayed except Jesus drink the cup of God’s wrath and accomplish our salvation.

Conclusion

This cry for another way has tremendous consequences for us. The only way for us to please and glorify God is by picking up our cross daily and following Jesus. In Gethsemane, Jesus shows us not only what God has done for man but also what man owes to God.

Man owes God complete submission to His will. In Gethsemane, the only perfect Man bowed before God and concluded His prayer, “Nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will” (Matt. 26:39). Such is the heart mankind should have before God—a heart of complete submission and faith.

Do you desire God’s perfect will for your life? Do you wonder what God’s perfect will is? Jesus says in John 6:40, “And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone

who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day.”

God’s will for us includes two steps. First, we must look to Jesus. Perhaps we have looked everywhere else. If we have looked closely, we have discovered that there is no other way to God. We must now turn from all other hopes and ideas and turn to Jesus.

Second, believe in Jesus. Receive Him and trust Him as He offers Himself in the gospel. He offers Himself to you as your God—crucified, buried, and resurrected—to glorify the Father and save you from God’s wrath. Believe He is your only Mediator with God, your perfect High Priest who knows your weaknesses and brings you to God as a friend and servant, not an enemy.

This is God’s will for us—look to Jesus Christ and believe in Him alone for salvation. God wills to give eternal life and the promise of the resurrection to all who look to and believe on His Son. Let us not harden our hearts. Let us submit to the Spirit’s call to Christ in the gospel—perhaps for the first time. Confess your sin. Turn away from sin. Let us put our hope in Jesus to deliver us, to make us new, and teach us to live by God’s will. Turn to Jesus from your sin and trust Him to give you eternal life and to be your sacrifice that turns God’s wrath away.

Those who understand why the silent no was so necessary have abundant reason to rejoice. We should not think an answer was not given on that amazing night in Gethsemane. Nor are we to think that the Father’s silent no indicated neglect, as though God the Father were a “divine deadbeat dad.” Rather, we are to understand that the only

perfect Father found occasion to deny the only perfect Son because such denial achieved the only perfect goals: a perfectly qualified high priesthood, reconciliation through the only God-man Mediator, loving atonement for the sins of men, the vindication of the Father's righteousness, and the ever-redounding glory of the Father in the Son and the Son in the Father. Gethsemane's silent answer rings eternally in the loud joyous praises of the universe.

Because the Father answered no, sinners have a merciful and faithful High Priest perfectly intimate with all their weaknesses. We have One we can approach for grace. Because the Father answered no, we have One who stands between us in all our ungodliness and God in all His holiness to reconcile us and reunite us as friends rather than rebels. Because the Father answered no, those who have faith in Christ need never fear the Father's wrath again; His anger has been fully satisfied in the Son's atonement. Because the Father said no, we stand assured that our acceptance with God happened on completely legitimate grounds—no parlor tricks, no loopholes, no legal fiction, no injustice to threaten or question the exchange of our sin for Jesus' righteousness. Because the Father said no, we will forever enjoy and share the glory of Father and Son in the unending, timeless age to come.

I am so glad the Father said no.



For Further Gazing and Reflection

1. Read Matthew 26:36–45. Describe Jesus' circumstances in this passage. Explain why He would ask, "Is there no other way?"
2. The Father said no to the Son for several reasons. What is the Bible's teaching in Hebrews 2:14–18 and 4:14–16 about why the Father said no?
3. In His garden brokenness, what does Jesus reveal to us about the Father?
4. What parties were at war in the garden of Gethsemane? Who brought an end to the war, and how did He accomplish it?
5. Why couldn't we drink the cup of God's wrath for ourselves? Why could only Jesus drink it, and what did His drinking it accomplish?
6. What was the "cosmic contradiction" that needed to be set right? How did God set it right?
7. What is the ultimate reason the Father said no?