

Chapter III

THE CUP

In both the Old and New Testament the term 'cup' (Hebrew *kos*, Greek, *poterion*) denotes primarily a drinking vessel. Its first use appears with this sense in Genesis 40:11 where Joseph dreams of clusters of ripened grapes which he presses into Pharaoh's cup and puts the cup into the monarch's hand. By a metonymy the cup as a container came to signify its contents offered to be drunk. It thus became a common figure to express the experiences of life, be they sweet or bitter. In the religious context the cup became associated with God's appointments and dealings with his people in particular and mankind in general. So, for example, the Psalmist regards God himself as his cup when he sings, 'The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup' (Ps. 16:5). So too does his own cup 'overflow' (Ps. 23:5). But adversity, too, is a 'cup of the Lord's hand' (Hab. 2:16 cf. Ps. 75:8; Jer. 25:17). God's cup may contain judgement on the wicked (cf. Is. 51:17; Jer. 25:15f.; Rev. 14:10; 16:19; 18:6). It can also be a cup of correction for God's own people, to turn them again to the ways of righteousness (cf. Isa. 51:22).

The Passion of our Lord

The most significant use of the term 'cup' in the New Testament is in connection with our Lord's passion. Twice, near the time of the crucifixion, does it come into Christ's own speech; once in a metaphorical sense in his prayer in Gethsemane, and once in a literal sense in the upper room at his institution of the Last Supper. Deeply moving and profoundly significant is our Lord's prayer at the place called Gethsemane: ' "My Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt" ' (Matt. 26:39 cf. Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42). The cup from which he prayed to be spared did not involve just the physical pain and suffering of the crucifixion which awaited him.

There must have been in that cup something more deeply felt than pain; something more terrible than reproach; something more unspeakably awful even than the nails in his hands and feet and the sword stabbing his side. There was in that cup given him to drink that which made him 'exceedingly sorrowful and very heavy' in mind, in soul, in spirit, and which caused him to pray in an agony of blood-like sweat that it should pass from him. It was

not the fear of coming scorn, nor yet even the dread of public crucifixion, that drove him to utter that prayer. What caused Christ to be sore amazed and troubled in heart was that the cup from which he must drink was held out to him by the hand of his own God and Father. It was his own God and Father who would put him to grief and lay on him the burden of all human iniquity. Not, then, from the Jewish leaders, the Roman authorities, the howling crowd, the traitor Judas, nor yet finally from Satan himself, did the testing now come. Rather was it the case, as C.H. Spurgeon says in a powerful sermon entitled 'The Agony of Gethsemane':

a cup filled by one He knew to be His Father, but who, nevertheless he understood to have appointed Him a very bitter potion, a cup not to be drunk by His body and to spend its gall upon His flesh, but a cup which specially amazed His soul and troubled His inmost heart. He drank from it, and therefore be ye sure that it was a draught more dreadful than physical pain, since from that he did not shrink: it was a potion more dreadful than reproach, from that he had not turned aside; more dreadful than Satanic temptation, - that he had overcome; it was something inconceivably dreadful, amazingly full of dread which came from the Father's hand.¹

Both the wrath of God's judgement on sin and the hell of being forsaken by the Father were in the cup. To be under sin's condemnation, to be cut off from communion with God his Father as if himself a sinner, was the real poison in the cup given him to drink. To be wounded for transgressions not his own and bruised for iniquities he did not commit; to be put in the place of death when it belonged to him to have life in himself; to bear in his body humanity's sin when he had no sin of his own to carry; to be under the wrath of God when he before the world's creation was eternally enfolded in the Father's love - such were among the terrible ingredients of the cup which he must drink. To be under the curse of the law on account of sin; to die on a gibbet as one accursed of God - his own God and Father - was for him the most poignant, the most heart-breaking of all. He must take the cup of woe from the Father's hand knowing the bitterness of its potion. All hell was distilled into that cup and he must drink it to the last drop. It was human sin which mixed the ingredients of the cup, and he who knew no sin saw the terrible reality that it is. He alone of the sons of men had the measure of the sin he must take upon himself. He alone knew sin in its every reach and extent, and the absoluteness of God's wrath against it, seeing in the cup all the fullness of sin and the Father's holy judgement of it.

Mark records that with the cross looking dark before him Jesus 'began to be sore amazed' (Mark 14:33 AV). Luther found these words the most astonishing in the whole New Testament. There was nothing in all the world,

he declares, that could sore amaze the Son of God but the huge totality of the sin of humanity which must be 'laid on' him. Sin was so exceedingly sinful, so unspeakably evil, that in sore amazement the strong Son of God was pressed down by it to death and hell. None of us really knows what sin is, being ourselves sinners. It belongs to sin itself not to appear as sin. And it belongs to sinners to excuse it, to minimise it, to regard ourselves as not specially evil and our sinful deeds as mere hiccups in our human condition. Of the froth of the cup we may have some little notion; but of the reality itself we know not the first thing. Take away sin's terrible wages, its sure and full discovery and exposure, its first and second death, its day of judgement, and the fire that is not quenched, and see them as mere froth of the cup. Take away all that, and there is left pure, essential, unadulterated sin, what the apostle Paul calls so masterfully, 'the sinfulness of sin' (cf. Rom. 7:13).

As Christ looked into the cup that was proffered to him with all its awful mixture, it is not to be wondered at that he was 'utterly astonished' being 'taken aback' at the dreadful prospect of drinking it. So in 'an agony' he prayed that if it were possible the cup might pass from him. There in Gethsemane a tremendous battle was fought out in the arena of his soul. For as he saw the cup he shrank from the ordeal, yet his pledged obedience and dedication to fulfil the Father's will, not without a struggle, rose triumphantly in him. For there is the note of victory at the end of the prayer, 'nevertheless, not my will but thine be done'. The 'nevertheless' is the recognition that he will most surely carry out to its utmost end the Father's purpose in sending him into the world. It is the 'nevertheless' of acceptance and dedication. 'That was what Jesus did', what 'he attained through the agony of the garden. The agony does not represent a doubt as to his calling against the dreadful temptation to renounce it which came in the hour and with the power of darkness.'² So did he accept the cup and drank it all.

Forsaken by God

To bear in himself sin's curse and judgement meant Jesus being forsaken by his God and Father. The awful isolation of the cry of Jesus on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). cannot be separated in the experience of Christ from some real, if mysterious, connection with the sin he came to deal with in his death on the cross. The sense of God's presence was lost to Christ as he was overwhelmed by the enormity of the cup's awful mixture. There was lost to him - taken from him - that unbroken awareness of the nearness of God his Father which had hitherto been his constant experience. At Calvary God the holy Father who cannot look on sin or behold iniquity dare not lift his eyes on the Son of his love laden with transgressions. He must turn himself away from the terrible scene. For it

belongs to sin's nature and being to separate the sinner from God and for God to hide his face from it. So on Calvary's tree did Christ by taking to himself the sin of all sinners, experience the God-forsakenness of sin's judgement. So did God separate himself from him as the scapegoat was sent into the wilderness bearing the sin of the people, away from the presence of God in the sanctuary. Writes Eberhard Jungel, 'That this man dies for *us*, that he became a curse *for us* on the gallows, can be asserted only on the basis of an event which interprets the God-forsakenness of his death *positively*.³ Hanged on a tree, by the law accursed, Jesus exclaimed on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?", and yet at the end he can say, "Father into thy hands I commit my spirit" ' (Luke 23:46). God who had turned his back on his Son made 'a curse' and 'sin' for us, turned to him again as he declared finished the work he came to do at the Father's bidding.

Therefore, says Jungel,

Because he depended totally on God, he not only initiated this conflict of the law (that would condemn him as one accursed) with itself, but he submitted himself to this conflict which then ended in God-forsakenness. By depending totally on God his life ended in the event of God-forsakenness. The special severity of Jesus' God-forsakenness on the cross, is the experience of that God-forsakenness by an existence derived solely from God. The Marcan cry of the dying Christ, interpreted with Psalm 22:1, can express that God-forsakenness as vividly as it does only because its precondition is God-relatedness. Jesus' fatal God-forsakenness is not lessened by that, but rather intensified to an extreme degree because it occurs within the context of a unique certainty of God. The God whose coming was proclaimed by Jesus has now forsaken him on the cross. That Jesus, according to Mark, cries out to the God who is forsaking him, "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34), is the experience of a distance of God which is not his fault, which was caused by the law, and which exceeds the hell of godlessness in that Jesus' lifelong insistence on the coming of God is compressed into this cry. Paul's interpretation is harsh, but precise; he became a 'curse' (Gal. 3:13).⁴

In Christ's God-forsakenness on the cross, we are, then, in touch with the ultimate mystery of the divine transaction for the open possibility of man's redemption which lies in the final mystery of the Godhead. Calvin regards the God-forsakenness of Christ as giving meaning to the credal statement, 'he descended into hell'. He thus asserts that,

Nothing had been done if Christ had only endured corporeal death. In order to interpose between us and God's anger and satisfy his

righteous judgement, it was necessary that he should feel the weight of divine vengeance. Whence also it was necessary that he engage, as it were, at close quarters with the powers of hell and the horror of eternal death.⁵

This is, indeed, a strong statement and one which even some Reformed theologians hesitate to support. Nevertheless, there was for Christ in the cup he would drink the terrible awareness of God-forsakenness so that in some sense he was sharing in and taking to himself the reality of sin as resulting in banishment from God's presence and fellowship. In the agony of the garden he accepted that in his death he would be burdened by the world's sin, and being thus numbered with transgressors in the sin-bearing event of Calvary, he must of necessity experience the desolation of God-forsakenness. Thus does Christ take the cup that the Father had given him to drink (John 18:11) and, betrayed by Judas and falsely condemned by the rulers, go to Calvary's cross to die for our sins (1 Cor. 15:3), the just for the unjust, to bring us to God (1 Pet. 3:18).

It is because of his drinking the cup of our sins' judgement that there is now no condemnation for such as are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1). It is because of his forsakenness by God in the bearing of the curse of human sin as separation from God that our access (Eph. 2:18) to God is achieved. Thus does the cup of suffering become the cup of redemption for all who 'take the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord' (Ps. 116:13 AV). For that literal cup of the outpoured wine is eloquent in its symbolism of the cup proclaiming his blood shed for many for the remission of sins. In the cross the symbolic cup of Gethsemane was made actual; and the actual cup of the upper room became symbolic. For through Christ's death the symbolic cup had its actualisation as atonement and the actual cup received its symbolisation as redemption. So was the cup of the wrath of God in sin's judgement merged in the cup of God's love for sin's forgiveness. Such is the cup of the new covenant in Christ's blood (1 Cor. 11:25), and 'the cup of blessing which we bless' (1 Cor. 10:16). The cup which Jesus passed round to his disciples corresponds to that which in the paschal ritual bore the name of *kos*, the cup of blessing which the father of the family circulated to close the feast. The use of the definite article - *to*, 'the', - designates the cup specifically as the one which stood there before him, i.e. Jesus at the last supper. But it is now given a new significance to typify the blood shed for the remission of sins through which men and women are brought together into the family of God, and the blood of the covenant to ratify his promises of faithfulness to his redeemed people.