

# Our Lord's Strange Hesitation in Approaching Death

by Olin Alfred Curtis

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*Jesus' hesitation to go to the cross was due to his realization of the weight of sin and the difficulty of saving those who were responsible for his death.*

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 31:31, Matthew 16:21, Matthew 26:39, Matthew 27:46, Mark 10:45

**Topics:** "The Cross", "Divine Suffering"

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## Description

Olin Alfred Curtis delves into the primary attitude of Jesus towards his death, emphasizing that Jesus did not view his death as a mere incident or accident, but as a moral necessity, a means of ransom for humanity, and as the establishment of a new covenant of grace. Despite understanding the importance and purpose of his death, Jesus hesitated in the garden of Gethsemane, expressing a moment of human struggle and agony, culminating in the cry, 'My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from me.' Various inadequate explanations have been offered for this hesitation, but the true clue lies in the profound agony of being forsaken by God on the cross.

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## Transcript

His Primary Attitude. The strangeness of our Lord's hesitation will stand out more clearly, if we first notice his primary attitude, or the way that he as Redeemer looked upon his own death.

1. He did not regard his death as a natural incident terminating life; nor as an accident resulting from the disposition and deed of man. After the confession of Saint Peter ("Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God") our Lord began definitely to speak of his coming death: "From that time began Jesus to show unto his disciples, that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and the third day be raised up" (Saint Matt. 16.21; compare with Saint Mark 10.33). The expression "that he must" (\*dti dei auton\*) cannot mean that the circumstances, the hostile forces against him, render his death inevitable. We are certain of this point for several reasons: First, the rebuke to Peter implies that the must is moral. Second, such statements as that in the tenth chapter of Saint John ("I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again") show that Jesus regarded his death as a matter entirely within his own control. Third, the scene in Gethsemane further shows that Jesus regarded his death as finally a pure question of obedience to his Father (also compare with Saint John 10.18). It is, then, beyond a doubt that our Saviour did not look upon his death as incident or accident, but did look

upon it as a moral necessity, as an essential feature of his mission of redemption.

2. More precisely, our Lord regarded his death as a means of ransom for men. In Saint Mark's gospel (10.45) we read: "For the Son of man also came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." This passage has been dealt with by Dr. Hollmann in a most radical fashion. The \*anti pollon\* he separates from \*lytron\* and connects with \*dounai\*. The term \*lytron\* he renders freeing (\*Befreiung\*). With these radical changes, Hollmann makes the passage mean no more than this: "To free men from their stubborn pride and bring them to the spirit of repentance, Jesus gives up his life instead of many being obliged to give up their lives." If this arbitrary ingenuity is "advanced New Testament scholarship," then we must look toward the immediate future of the Christian church with deepening dread. But I have brought up this extremely radical interpretation by Hollmann to indicate how impossible it is to empty our Saviour's conception of his death of all redemptional meaning. Even in this comparative moral emptiness furnished by Hollmann, Jesus Christ considers his death as very important for the spiritual liberation of men.

3. Our Lord regarded his death as a covenant. At this point, again, there is such destructive work in criticism that in systematic theology, anyway, it is best to wait until some of the rationalistic caprice "is blown into the sea," before we try to do any thorough work. But we can easily get at a fragment of affirmation. Professor McGiffert says: "There can be no doubt that Jesus ate the Last Supper with his disciples, as recorded in all three of the synoptic gospels, and that he said of the bread which he broke and gave to his companions, 'This is my body,' and of the wine which he gave them to drink, 'This is my blood of the covenant which is shed for many,' and that he did it with a reference to his approaching death." Let us for the present be content and ask for no larger admission. What is the meaning of that expression "blood of the covenant"? Probably it refers back to the words in Jeremiah (31.31-34): "Behold, the days come, saith Jehovah, that I will make a new covenant: . . . for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin will I remember no more." This much, then, we can affirm: Our Lord, at the Last Supper, looked upon his death as the instrumental establishment of the prophesied new covenant of grace under which sin could be forgiven.

Our Lord's Hesitation. We are now prepared to note the strangeness of our Saviour's hesitation when in the garden he cried out: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from me." If, in his primary attitude, our Lord regarded his death as an essential feature of the very plan of redemption for which he came into the world; if he regarded his death as not merely important, but even the definite means of man's ransom; and if he regarded this ransoming death as the actual inauguration of the new covenant and dispensation of grace; if, in other words, every redemptional thing Christ was aiming to do was, in his own estimate, to be achieved only and precisely by his death, how could he, as Son of God and Redeemer of men, hesitate, actually shrink back from that death? Superficially, one would expect that our Lord would approach death with solemn moral eagerness, if not with such a spirit of joyous triumph as that which made Saint Paul so ready to be offered.

Inadequate Explanations. Of this hesitation there have been a number of purely humanitarian and rationalistic explanations: By Thiess, that Jesus was suddenly "attacked by some malady"; by Heumann, that "in addition to his inward sorrow Jesus had contracted a cold in the clayey ground traversed by the Kidron"; by Strauss, that "Jesus on that evening in the garden experienced a violent access of fear"; and by Renan -- one refuses to translate the sentimental indecency.

But a very different kind of an explanation, both in spirit and in fact, is that given suggestively by Principal Fairbairn in his *Philosophy of the Christian Religion*. He says:

"And Gethsemane represents the struggle of Jesus with the new problem which thus came before his imagination personified in Judas and the priests, and which he had to solve in the very face, if not in the very article, of death.

"And what was this new problem? Jesus was holy, and felt as only the sinless can the stain of sin burn like a living fire upon his soul. He had conceived himself as a Redeemer by the sacrifice of himself, as a Saviour by death. But now, when he comes face to face with this death, what does he find? That sin has taken occasion from his very grace to become more exceedingly sinful, to mix itself up with his sacrifice, penetrating and effacing it, transmuting it from a free and gracious act into a violent and necessitated death. His act of redemption becomes, so to say, the opportunity for sin to increase. The thing he most hates seems to become a partner with him in the work he most loves, contributing to its climax and consummation. Or, if not so conceived, it must be conceived under a still more dreadful form, as forcing itself into his way, taking possession of his work, turning it into 'a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense,' a means of creating sinners while it had been intended to save from sin. And there was an even more intolerable element in the situation: the men who were combining to effect this death were persons he was dying to save, and by their action they were making the saving a matter more infinitely hard, more vastly improbable, and changing the efficient cause of salvation into a sufficient reason for judgment ... From death as such he does not shrink, but from its mode and agencies, from death under the form and conditions which involve its authors in what appears inexpiable guilt, his whole nature recoils."

The spirit of this explanation is so large and sincere that one dislikes to make any criticism. But there are very serious objections, two of which I will indicate: First, there is, under the explanation, a confusing of sin with the expression of sin in crime. Sin is causal to crime, but crime is not causal to sin. From the standpoint of fundamental reality, the most dreadful thing, as far as those leaders who brought about the death of Christ were concerned, was not the crucifixion itself, but the fact that they were the kind of men they were. And a study of the life of Christ shows that he, long before, knew all about them. While he pitied the deluded and managed people, he branded the leaders with fiery invective. Second, the explanation is redemptionally superficial. It lies, like a sentimentality, on the surface of the awful deeps of redemption. That the Eternal Son of God could come into this world at infinite cost in self-sacrifice because of sin -- "whole ages upon ages of bottomless sin -- and then, at the crucial point of his atonement for that sin, could have his redemptional consciousness exclusively occupied with one phase, one local item of the huge chaos of wrong, is to me entirely inconceivable. Principal Fairbairn is too profound a Christian thinker to be long satisfied with his own explanation.

The Clue to the Hesitation. When we read the account of our Lord's crucifixion, the clue to the hesitation becomes evident. It is in those words of agony: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Long before we have any heart to try to understand the meaning of these words of agony, we feel sure that they indicate the "cup" which Jesus Christ dreaded to empty. We feel sure of this because the two notes of agony, that of the prayer in the garden and that of the cry upon the cross, have the same intense spiritual accent, and the same indefinable suggestion of the depth of redemption.

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