In the previous chapters I have sought to establish two facts about the cross. First, its central importance (to Christ, to his apostles and to his world-wide church ever since), and secondly its deliberate character (for, though due to human wickedness, it was also due to the set purpose of God, voluntarily accepted by Christ who gave himself up to death).

But why? We return to this basic puzzle. What was there about the crucifixion of Jesus which, in spite of its horror, shame and pain, makes it so important that God planned it in advance and Christ came to endure it?

An initial construction

It may be helpful to answer this question in four stages, beginning with the straightforward and the non-controversial, and gradually penetrating more deeply into the mystery.

First, Christ died for us. In addition to being necessary and voluntary, his death was altruistic and beneficial. He undertook it for our sake, not for his own, and he believed that through it he would secure for us a good which could be secured in no other way. The Good Shepherd, he said, was going to lay down his life 'for the sheep', for their benefit. Similarly, the words he spoke in the upper room when giving them the bread were, 'This is my body given for you.' The apostles picked up this simple concept and repeated it, sometimes making it more personal by changing it from the second person to the first: 'Christ died for us.'

Professor Martin Hengel has shown with great erudition that the concept

is no explanation yet, and no identification of the blessing he died to procure for us, but at least we are agreed over the 'for you' and 'for us'.

Secondly, Christ died for us that he might bring us to God (1 Pet. 3:18). The beneficial purpose of his death focuses down on our reconciliation. As the Nicene Creed expresses it, 'for us (general) and for our salvation (particular) he came down from heaven . . . .

The salvation he died to win for us is variously portrayed. At times it is conceived negatively as redemption, forgiveness or deliverance. At other times it is positive - new or eternal life, or peace with God in the enjoyment of his favour and fellowship. The precise vocabulary does not matter at present. The important point is that it is in consequence of his death that he is able to confer upon us the great blessing of salvation.

Thirdly, Christ died for our sins. Our sins were the obstacle preventing us from receiving the gift he wanted to give. So they had to be removed before it could be bestowed. And he dealt with our sins, or took them away, by his death. This expression 'for our sins' (or very similar phrases) is used by most of the major New Testament authors; they seem to have been quite clear that - in some way still to be determined - Christ's death and our sins were related to each other. Here is a sample of quotations: 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures' (Paul); 'Christ died for sins once for all' (Peter); 'he has appeared once for all . . . to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself', and he 'offered for all time one sacrifice for sins' (Hebrews); 'the blood of Jesus, (God's) Son, purifies us from all sin' (John); 'to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood . . . be glory' (Revelation). All these verses (and many more) link his death with our sins. What, then, is the link?

Fourthly, Christ died our death, when he died for our sins. That is to say, granted that his death and our sins are linked, the link is not merely that of consequence (he was the victim of our human brutality) but of penalty (he endured in his innocent person the penalty our sins had deserved). For, according to Scripture, death of a person voluntarily dying for his city, family and friends, truth, or to pacify the gods, was widespread in the Graeco-Roman world. A special composite word hyperapothéskomai ('to die for') had been formed to express it. The gospel that 'Christ died for us' would, therefore, have been readily intelligible to first-century pagan audiences. (Martin Hengel, Atonement, pp. 1-32.)

For the negative see, e.g., Gal. 1:4; Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:28. For the positive see, e.g., Jn. 3:14-16; Eph. 2:16; Col. 1:20; 1 Thes. 3:10; 1 Pet. 3:18.

1 1 Cor. 15:3; 1 Pet. 3:18; Heb. 9:26; 10:12; 1 Jn. 1:7; Rev. 1:5-6.

2 For the negative see, e.g., Gal. 1:4; Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:28. For the positive see, e.g., Jn. 3:14-16; Eph. 2:16; Col. 1:20; 1 Thes. 3:10; 1 Pet. 3:18.

4 See Gn. 5:24; 2 Ki. 2:1-11; 1 Cor. 15:50-54.

5 E.g., Gn. 2:17; 3:3, 19, 23; Rom. 5:12-14; Rev. 20:14; 21:8.

6 Ps. 49:12, 20; Ec. 3:19-21.

7 See the occurrence of the verb embramomai in John 11:33, 38. Used of the snorting of horses, it was transferred to the strong human emotions of displeasure and indignation.

8 Jn. 10:18; Lk. 23:46.
The words of administration are recorded somewhat differently by the upper room, the Garden of Gethsemane, although it is their witness, is not their invention. Is it a rather complex theory imposed on the story of the cross, or does the evangelists' narrative itself supply evidence for it and even remain unintelligible without it? I shall argue the latter. Further, I shall seek to show that what the evangelists portray, although it is their witness, is not their invention. What they are doing is to allow us to enter a little way into the mind of Christ himself.

So we shall look at three of the main scenes of Jesus' last twenty-four hours on earth - the upper room, the Garden of Gethsemane and the place called Golgotha. As we do so, we shall be unable to limit ourselves to the mere telling of a poignant story, since each scene contains sayings of Jesus which demand explanation and supply evidence for it and even remain unintelligible without it? I shall argue the latter. Further, I shall seek to show that what the evangelists portray, although it is their witness, is not their invention. What they are doing is to allow us to enter a little way into the mind of Christ himself.

Before we do so, however, there is a noteworthy fact which needs to delay us. It concerns Jesus' perspective throughout. Our story begins on the evening of Maundy Thursday. Jesus had already seen the sun set for the last time. Within about fifteen hours his limbs would be stretched out on the cross. Within twenty-four hours, indeed, its last six.

The Last Supper in the upper room

Jesus was spending his last evening on earth in quiet seclusion with his apostles. It was the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and they had met to eat the Passover meal together in a friend's house. The place is described as 'a large upper room, furnished and ready', and we can picture them round a low meal-table, reclining on cushions on the floor. Evidently no servant was in attendance, so that there had been no-one to wash their feet before the meal began. Nor was any of the apostles humble enough to undertake this menial task. It was to their intense embarrassment, therefore, that during supper Jesus put on a slave's apron, poured water into a basin, and went round washing their feet, thus doing what none of them had been willing to do. He then proceeded to tell them how authentic love always expresses itself in humble service and how the world would identify them as his disciples only if they loved one another. In contrast to the priority of sacrificial and serving love, he warned them that one of them was going to betray him. He also spoke much of his impending departure, of the coming of the Comforter to take his place, and of this Spirit of truth's varied ministry of teaching and witnessing.

Then, at some point while the meal was still in progress, they watched enthralled as he took a loaf of bread, blessed it (that is, gave thanks for it), broke it into pieces and handed it round to them with the words, 'This is my body, which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after supper had ended, he took a cup of wine, gave thanks for it, passed it round to them, and said either 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood' or 'This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me'.

These are tremendously significant deeds and words. It is a pity that we are so familiar with them that they tend to lose their

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9 The words of administration are recorded somewhat differently by Paul and the Synoptic evangelists. See 1 Cor. 11:23–25; Mt. 26:26–28; Mk. 14:22–24; Lk. 22:17–19.
impact. For they throw floods of light on Jesus' own view of his death. By what he did with the bread and wine, and by what he said about them, he was visibly dramatizing his death before it took place and giving his own authoritative explanation of its meaning and purpose. He was teaching at least three lessons.

The first lesson concerned the centrality of his death. Solemnly and deliberately, during his last evening with them, he was giving instructions for his own memorial service. It was not to be a single occasion, however, like our modern memorial services, the final tribute paid by friends and relatives. Instead, it was to be a regular meal or service or both. He specifically told them to repeat it: 'do this in remembrance of me'. What were they to do? They were to copy what he had done, both his acts and his words, namely to take, break, bless, identify and share bread and wine. What did the bread and wine signify? The words he had spoken explained. Of the bread he had said 'This is my body given for you', and of the wine 'This is my blood shed for you'. So his death spoke to them from both the elements. The bread did not stand for his living body, as he reclined with them at table, but his body as it was shortly to be 'given' for them in death. Similarly, the wine did not stand for his blood as it flowed in his veins while he spoke to them, but his blood which was shortly to be 'poured out' for them in death. The evidence is plain and irrefutable. The Lord's Supper, which was instituted by Jesus, and which is the only regular commemorative act authorized by him, dramatizes neither his birth nor his life, neither his words nor his works, but only his death. Nothing could indicate more clearly the central significance which Jesus attached to his death.

It was by his death that he wished above all else to be remembered. There is then, it is safe to say, no Christianity without the cross. If the cross is not central to our religion, ours is not the religion of Jesus.

Secondly, Jesus was teaching about the purpose of his death. According to Paul and Matthew, Jesus' words about the cup referred not only to his 'blood' but to the 'new covenant' associated with his blood, and Matthew adds further that his blood was to be shed 'for the forgiveness of sins'. Here is the truly fantastic assertion that through the shedding of Jesus' blood in death God was taking the initiative to establish a new pact or 'covenant' with his people, one of the greatest promises of which would be the forgiveness of sinners. What did he mean?

Many centuries previously God had entered into a covenant with Abraham, promising to bless him with a good land and an abundant posterity. God renewed this covenant at Mount Sinai, after rescuing Israel (Abraham's descendants) from Egypt. He pledged himself to be their God and to make them his people. Moreover, this covenant was ratified with the blood of sacrifice: 'Moses ... took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, “This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”' 10 Hundreds of years passed, in which the people forsook God, broke his covenant and provoked his judgment, until one day in the seventh century BC the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, saying:

‘The time is coming,’ declares the LORD,
‘when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.
It will not be like the covenant
I made with their forefathers
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them;'
declares the LORD.
‘This is the covenant that I will make
with the house of Israel
after that time,’ declares the LORD.
‘I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.
No longer will a man teach his neighbour,
or a man his brother, saying, “Know the LORD,”
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest;'
declares the LORD.
‘For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more’
(Je. 31:31-34).

More than six more centuries passed, years of patient waiting and growing expectancy, until one evening in an upper room in Jerusalem a Galilean peasant, carpenter by trade and preacher by vocation, dared to say in effect: 'this new covenant, prophesied in Jeremiah, is about to be established; the forgiveness of sins prom-

10 Ex. 24:8. See also the covenant references in Is. 42:6; 49:8; Zc. 9:11 and Heb. 9:18–20.
ised as one of its distinctive blessings is about to become available; and the sacrifice to seal this covenant and procure this forgiveness will be the shedding of my blood in death.’ Is it possible to exaggerate the staggering nature of this claim? Here is Jesus’ view of his death. It is the divinely appointed sacrifice by which the new covenant with its promise of forgiveness will be ratified. He is going to die in order to bring his people into a new covenant relationship with God.

The third lesson Jesus was teaching concerned the need to appropriate his death personally. If we are right in saying that in the upper room Jesus was giving an advance dramatization of his death, it is important to observe what form the drama took. It did not consist of one actor on the stage, with a dozen in the audience. No, it involved them as well as him, so that they took part in it as well as he. True, he took, blessed and broke the bread, but then he explained its significance as he gave it to them to eat. Again he took and blessed the cup, but then he explained its meaning as he gave it to them to drink. Thus they were not just spectators of this drama of the cross; they were participants in it. They can hardly have failed to get the message. Just as it was not enough for the bread to be broken and the wine to be poured out, but they had to eat and drink, so it was not enough for him to die, but they had to appropriate the benefits of his death personally. The eating and drinking were, and still are, a vivid acted parable of receiving Christ as our crucified Saviour and of feeding on him in our hearts by faith. Jesus had already taught this in his great discourse on the Living Bread which followed his feeding of the five thousand:

‘I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink’ (Jn. 6:53–55).

His words on that occasion and his actions in the upper room both bear witness to the same reality. For him to give his body and blood in death was one thing; for us to make the blessings of his death our own is another. Yet many have not learnt this distinction. I can still remember what a revelation it was to me as a young man to be told that any action on my part was necessary. I used to imagine that because Christ had died, the world had been automatically put right. When someone explained to me that Christ had died for me, I responded rather haughtily ‘everybody knows that’, as if the fact itself or my knowledge of the fact had brought me salvation. But God does not impose his gifts on us willy-nilly; we have to receive them by faith. Of both the divine gift and the human reception the Lord’s Supper remains the perpetual outward sign. It is intended to be ‘a participation in the body and blood of Christ’ (1 Cor. 10:16).

Here then are the lessons of the upper room about the death of Christ. First, it was central to his own thinking about himself and his mission, and he desired it to be central to ours. Secondly, it took place in order to establish the new covenant and procure its promised forgiveness. Thirdly, it needs to be appropriated individually if its benefits (the covenant and the forgiveness) are to be enjoyed. The Lord’s Supper which Jesus instituted was not meant to be a slightly sentimental ‘forget-me-not’, but rather a service rich in spiritual significance.

What makes the events of the upper room and the significance of the Lord’s Supper yet more impressive is that they belong to the context of the Passover. That Jesus thought of his death in terms of an Old Testament sacrifice we have already seen. But which sacrifice did he have in mind? Not only, it seems, the Mount Sinai sacrifice of Exodus 24, by which the covenant was decisively renewed, but also the Passover sacrifice of Exodus 12, which became an annual commemoration of God’s liberation of Israel and covenant with them.

According to the Synoptic evangelists, the last supper was the Passover meal which followed the sacrificing of the Passover lambs. This is clear because the disciples asked Jesus where they should make preparations to ‘eat the Passover’, and Jesus himself referred to the meal as ‘this Passover’. According to John, however, the Passover meal would not be eaten until the Friday evening, which meant that Jesus was dying on the cross at the very time that the Passover lambs were being killed. In his important book The Eucharistic Words of Jesus, Joachim Jeremias elaborated the three main attempts which have been made to harmonize these two chronologies (pp. 20–62). The best seems to be to declare both correct, each having been followed by a different group. Either the Pharisees and Sadducees were using alternative calendars, which differed from each other by a day, or there were so many pilgrims in Jerusalem for the festival (perhaps as many as 100,000) that the Galileans killed their lambs on the Thursday and ate them that evening, while the Judeans observed the celebration one day later.

However the two chronologies are to be reconciled, the Passover
context further enforces the three lessons that we have already considered. The central importance which Jesus attached to his death is underlined by the fact that he was actually giving instructions for the annual celebration of the Passover to be replaced by his own supper. For he spoke words of explanation over the bread and wine ('This is my body ... this is my blood ... '), just as the head of an Aramaic Jewish household did over the Passover food ('This is the bread of affliction which our fathers had to eat as they came out of Egypt', pp. 54–57). Thus 'Jesus modelled his sayings upon the ritual of interpreting the Passover' (p. 61).

This further clarifies Jesus' understanding of the purpose of his death. He 'presupposes', wrote Jeremias, 'a slaying that had separated flesh and blood. In other words, Jesus spoke of himself as a sacrifice'. Indeed, he was 'most probably speaking of himself as the paschal lamb', so that the meaning of his last parable was: 'I go to death as the true Passover sacrifice' (pp. 222–224). The implications of this are far-reaching. For in the original Passover in Egypt each paschal lamb died instead of the family's first-born son, and the first-born was spared only if a lamb was slain in his place. Not only had the lamb to be slain, but also its blood had to be sprinkled on the front door and its flesh eaten in a fellowship meal. Thus the Passover ritual taught the third lesson too, that it was necessary for the benefits of Christ's sacrificial death to be personally appropriated.

The agony in the Garden of Gethsemane

Supper is now over, and Jesus has finished his instruction of the apostles. He has urged them to abide in him, as the branches abide in the vine. He has warned them of the opposition of the world, yet encouraged them to bear witness to him none the less, remembering that the Spirit of truth will be the chief witness. He has also prayed – first for himself that he may glorify his Father in the coming ordeal, then for them that they may be kept in truth, holiness, mission and unity, and lastly for all those of subsequent generations who would believe in him through their message. Probably now they sing a hymn, and then together they leave the upper room. They walk through the streets of the city in the stillness of the night, and in the soft light of the Paschal moon, cross the Kidron Valley, begin to climb the Mount of Olives, and turn off into an olive orchard, as its name 'Gethsemane' ('oil press') suggests. It is evidently a favourite retreat for Jesus, for John comments that he 'had often met there with his disciples' (18:2).

Here something takes place which, despite the sober way the evangelists describe it, simply cries out for an explanation, and begins to disclose the enormous costliness of the cross to Jesus. We rightly call it 'the agony in the garden'.

Leaving most of the apostles behind, and urging them to watch and pray, he takes Peter, James and John – the intimate three – a stone's throw farther into the olive grove with him, shares with them that he feels 'overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death', and asks them to keep watch with him. He then goes on a little farther alone, falls prostrate with his face to the ground and prays: 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.' Returning to the apostles, he finds them sleeping and remonstrates with them. Going away a second time, he prays: 'My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.' Again he finds the disciples sleeping. So he leaves them once more and prays: 'My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.' Again he finds the disciples sleeping. So he leaves them once more and prays the third time, saying the same thing. After this third season of prayer he returns to find them asleep again, for they cannot enter into the fathomless mystery of his suffering. This is a path he has to walk alone. At some point, Luke says, he was 'in anguish' (or 'agonia'), and prayed yet more earnestly, so that 'his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground'.

As we approach this sacred scene, we should first consider the forceful words which Jesus and the evangelists used to express his strong emotions. We have been prepared for these a little by two of his earlier statements. The first, which Luke records, was that he had a baptism to undergo and felt 'distressed' (or 'pressed', even 'tormented', synéchō) until it was completed. The second was a saying which John records that his heart was troubled (or 'agitated', tarassō), so that he even wondered if he should ask his Father to save him from 'this hour'. This was an anticipation of Gethsemane.

B. B. Warfield wrote a careful study entitled 'On the Emotional Life of Our Lord', in the course of which he referred to the terms employed by the Synoptic evangelists in relation to Gethsemane. Luke's word agônia he defines as 'consternation, appalled reluctance'. Matthew and Mark share two expressions. The primary idea of 'troubled' (adémoneo), he suggests, is 'loathing aversion,

13 Cf. Ex. 12:26–27; 13:8; Dt. 16:3.
perhaps not unmixed with despondency', while Jesus' self-description as 'overwhelmed with sorrow' (perilypos) 'expresses a sorrow, or perhaps we would better say, a mental pain, a distress, which hems him in on every side, from which there is therefore no escape'. Mark uses another word of his own, 'deeply distressed' (ekthambeomai), which has been rendered 'horror-struck'; it is 'a term', Warfield adds, 'which more narrowly defines the distress as consternation – if not exactly dread, yet alarmed dismay'. Put together, these expressive words indicate that Jesus was feeling an acute emotional pain, causing profuse sweat, as he looked with apprehension and almost terror at his future ordeal.

This ordeal he refers to as a bitter 'cup' which he ardently prays may, if possible, be taken from him, so that he does not have to drink it. What is this cup? Is it physical suffering from which he shrinks, the torture of the scourge and the cross, together perhaps with the mental anguish of betrayal, denial and desertion by his friends, and the mockery and abuse of his enemies? Nothing could ever make me believe that the cup Jesus dreaded was any of these things (grievous as they were) or all of them together. His physical and moral courage throughout his public ministry had been indomitable. To me it is ludicrous to suppose that he was now afraid of pain, insult and death. Socrates in the prison cell in Athens, according to Plato's account, took his cup of hemlock 'without trembling or changing colour or expression'. He then 'raised the cup to his lips, and very cheerfully and quietly drained it'. When his friends burst into tears, he rebuked them for their 'absurd' behaviour and urged them to 'keep quiet and be brave'. He died without fear, sorrow or protest. So was Socrates braver than Jesus? Or were their cups filled with different poisons?

Then there have been the Christian martyrs. Jesus had himself told his followers that when insulted, persecuted and slandered, they were to 'rejoice and be glad'. Did Jesus not practise what he preached? His apostles did. Leaving the Sanhedrin with backs bleeding from a merciless flogging, they were actually 'rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name'. Pain and rejection were to them a joy and a privilege, - to secure his release lest they should deprive him of this honour! 'Let fire and the cross,' he wrote, 'let the companies of wild beasts, let breaking of bones and tearing of limbs, let the grinding of the whole body, and all the malice of the devil, come upon me; be it so, if only I may gain Christ Jesus!' A few years later, in the middle of the second century, Polycarp, the eighty-six-year-old Bishop of Smyrna, having refused to escape death either by fleeing or by denying Christ, was burnt at the stake. Just before the fire was lit, he prayed, 'O Father, I bless thee that thou hast counted me worthy to receive my portion among the number of martyrs.' As for Alban, the first known British Christian martyr during one of the severe persecutions of the third century, he was first cruelly beaten, yet suffered he the same patiently, nay rather joyfully, for the Lord's sake', and was then beheaded. And so it has continued in every generation. 'O the joy that the martyrs of Christ have felt', cried Richard Baxter, 'in the midst of the scorching flames!' Although made of flesh and blood like us, he continued, their souls could rejoice even 'while their bodies were burning'.

Of many examples which could be given from the present century I choose only those mentioned by Sadhu Sundar Singh, the Indian Christian mystic and evangelist. He told, for instance, of a Tibetan evangelist, flogged by tormentors who then rubbed salt into his wounds, whose 'face shone with peace and joy', and of another who, sewn into a damp yak skin and left in the sun for three days, 'was joyful all the time' and thanked God for the pain. It is true that the Sadhu sometimes embellished or romanticized his stories, yet there seems no reason to doubt his testimony, from his own experience and others', that even in the midst of torture God gives his people a supernatural joy and peace.

We turn back to that lonely figure in the Gethsemane olive orchard – prostrate, sweating, overwhelmed with grief and dread, begging if possible to be spared the drinking of the cup. The martyrs were joyful, but he was sorrowful; they were eager, but he was reluctant. How can we compare them? How could they have gained their inspiration from him if he had faltered when they did not? Besides, up till now he had been clear-minded about the necessity of his sufferings and death, determined to fulfil his destiny, and vehement in opposing any who sought to deflect him.
Had all that suddenly changed? Was he now after all, when the moment of testing came, a coward? No, no! All the evidence of his former teaching, character and behaviour is against such a conclusion.

In that case the cup from which he shrank was something different. It symbolized neither the physical pain of being flogged and crucified, nor the mental distress of being despised and rejected even by his own people, but rather the spiritual agony of bearing the sins of the world, in other words, of enduring the divine judgment which those sins deserved. That this is the correct understanding is strongly confirmed by Old Testament usage, for in both the Wisdom literature and the prophets the Lord's 'cup' was a regular symbol of his wrath. A wicked person was said to 'drink of the wrath of the Almighty' (Jb. 21:20). Through Ezekiel, Yahweh warned Jerusalem that she would shortly suffer the same fate as Samaria, which had been destroyed:

'You will drink your sister's cup,  
a cup large and deep;  
it will bring scorn and derision,  
for it holds so much.  
You will be filled with drunkenness and sorrow,  
the cup of ruin and desolation,  
the cup of your sister Samaria.  
You will drink it and drain it dry; . . .'
(Ezk. 23:32–34).

Not long afterwards this prophecy of judgment came true, and then the prophets began to encourage the people with promises of restoration. Describing Jerusalem as 'you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath, you who have drained to its dregs the goblet that makes men stagger', Isaiah summoned her to wake up and to get up, for Yahweh had now taken the cup out of her hand and she would never have to drink it again. Nor was the cup of the Lord's wrath given only to his disobedient people. Psalm 75 is a meditation on the universal judgment of God: 'In the hand of the Lord is a cup full of foaming wine mixed with spices; he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs.' Similarly, Jeremiah was told to take from God's hand a cup filled with the wine of his wrath and to make all the nations drink it to whom he was sent. The same figure of speech recurs in the book of Revelation, where the wicked 'will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath', and the final judgment is depicted as the pouring out of 'the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth'.

This Old Testament imagery will have been well known to Jesus. He must have recognized the cup he was being offered as containing the wine of God's wrath, given to the wicked, and causing a complete disorientation of body (staggering) and mind (confusion) like drunkenness. Was he to become so identified with sinners as to bear their judgment? From this contact with human sin his sinless soul recoiled. From the experience of alienation from his Father which the judgment on sin would involve, he hung back in horror. Not that for even a single instant he rebelled. His vision had evidently become blurred, as a dreadful darkness engulfed his spirit, but his will remained surrendered. Each prayer began 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me', and each prayer ended 'yet not as I will, but as you will'. Although in theory 'everything is possible' to God, as Jesus himself affirmed in Gethsemane (Mk. 14:36), yet this was not possible. God's purpose of love was to save sinners, and to save them righteously; but this would be impossible without the sin-bearing death of the Saviour. So how could he pray to be saved from 'this hour' of death? 'No,' he had said, he would not, since 'it was for this very reason I came to this hour' (Jn. 12:27).

From his agony of dread, as he contemplated the implications of his coming death, Jesus emerged with serene and resolute confidence. So when Peter drew his sword in a frantic attempt to avert the arrest, Jesus was able to say: 'Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?' (Jn. 18:11). Since John has not recorded Jesus' agonized prayers for the cup to be removed, this reference to it is all the more important. Jesus knows now that the cup will not be taken away from him. The Father has given it to him. He will drink it. Moreover, bitter and painful though the draining of the cup will be, he will yet find that to do the will of the Father who sent him and to finish his work will be his 'meat and drink' (as we might say), deeply and completely satisfying to his thirst (Jn. 4:34).

The agony in the garden opens a window on to the greater agony of the cross. If to bear man's sin and God's wrath was so terrible in anticipation, what must the reality have been like?

We may not know, we cannot tell,  
What pains he had to bear;  

24 Is. 51:17–22; Ps. 75:8; Je. 25:15–29 (cf. Hab. 2:16); 49:12; Rev. 14:10; 16:1ff. and 18:6.
But we believe it was for us
He hung and suffered there.

The cry of dereliction on the cross
We must now pass by the details of the betrayal and arrest of Jesus, his trials before Annas and Caiaphas, Herod and Pilate, Peter's denials, the cruel mockery by priests and soldiers, the spitting and the scourging, and the hysteria of the mob who demanded his death. We move on to the end of the story. Condemned to death by crucifixion, 'he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearsers is silent, so he did not open his mouth' (Is. 53:7). Carrying his own cross, until Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry it for him, he will have walked along the via dolorosa, out of the city, to Golgotha, 'the place of the skull'. 'Here they crucified him', the evangelists write, declining to dwell on the stripping, the clumsy hammering home of the nails, or the wrenching of his limbs as the cross was hoisted and dropped into its place. Even the excruciating pain could not silence his repeated entreaties: 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' The soldiers gambled for his clothes. Some women stood afar off. The crowd remained a while to watch. Jesus commended his mother to John's care and John to hers. He spoke words of kingly assurance to the penitent criminal crucified at his side. Meanwhile, the rulers sneered at him, shooating: 'He saved others, but he can't save himself!' Their words, spoken as an insult, were the literal truth. He could not save himself and others simultaneously. He chose to sacrifice himself in order to save the world.

Gradually the crowd thinned out, their curiosity glutted. At last silence fell and darkness came — darkness perhaps because no eye should see, and silence because no tongue could tell, the anguish of soul which the sinless Saviour now endured. 'At the birth of the Son of God', Douglas Webster has written, 'there was brightness at midnight; at the death of the Son of God there was darkness at noon.' What happened in the darkness is expressed by biblical writers in a variety of ways:

... he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

23 Douglas Webster, In Debt to Christ, p. 46.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!
The Son of Man came ... to give his life as a ransom for many.
Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people.
He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.
Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous,
to bring you to God.
God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.
Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.26

The fearful concept of Jesus 'bearing', even actually 'becoming', our sin and curse, how it could be and what it could mean, we will leave until the next chapters. Meanwhile, it seems that the darkness of the sky was an outward symbol of the spiritual darkness which enveloped him. For what is darkness in biblical symbolism but separation from God who is light and in whom 'there is no darkness at all' (1 In. 1:5)? 'Outer darkness' was one of the expressions Jesus used for hell, since it is an absolute exclusion from the light of God's presence. Into that outer darkness the Son of God plunged for us. Our sins blotted out the sunshine of his Father's face. We may even dare to say that our sins sent Christ to hell — not to the 'hell' (hadés, the abode of the dead) to which the Creed says he 'descended' after death, but to the 'hell' (geenna, the place of punishment) to which our sins condemned him before his body died.

The darkness seems to have lasted for three hours. For it was at the third hour (9 a.m.) that he was crucified, at the sixth hour (12 noon) that the darkness came over the whole land, and at the ninth hour (3 p.m.) that, emerging out of the darkness, Jesus cried out in a loud voice in Aramaic: 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' meaning, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'27 The Greek speakers present misunderstood his words and thought he

26 Is. 53:5–6; Jn. 1:29; Mk. 10:45; Heb. 9:28; 1 Pet. 2:24; 3:18; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13.
27 Mk. 15:25, 33–34.
was calling for Elijah. What he said is still misunderstood by many today. Four main explanations of his terrible cry of 'dereliction' (desertion, abandonment) have been offered. All commentators agree that he was quoting Psalm 22:1. But they are not agreed as to why he did so. What was the significance of this quotation on his lips?

First, some suggest that it was a cry of anger, unbelief or despair. Perhaps he had clung to the hope that even at the last moment the Father would send angels to rescue him, or at least that in the midst of his utter obedience to the Father's will he would continue to experience the comfort of the Father's presence. But no, it was now clear to him that he had been abandoned, and he cried out with a heart-rending 'why?' of dismay or defiance. His faith failed him. But of course, these interpreters add, he was mistaken. He imagined he was forsaken, when he was not. Those who thus explain the cry of dereliction can scarcely realize what they are doing. They are denying the moral perfection of the character of Jesus. They are saying that he was guilty of unbelief on the cross, as of cowardice in the garden. They are accusing him of failure, and failure at the moment of his greatest and supreme self-sacrifice. Christian faith protests against this explanation.

A second interpretation, which is a modification of the first, is to understand the shout of dereliction as a cry of loneliness. Jesus, it is now maintained, knew God's promises never to fail or forsake his people. He knew the steadfastness of God's covenant love. So his 'why?' was not a complaint that God had actually forsaken him, but rather that he had allowed him to feel forsaken. 'I have sometimes thought', wrote T. R. Glover, 'there never was an utterance that reveals more amazingly the distance between feeling and fact.' Instead of addressing God as 'Father', he could now call him only 'my God', which is indeed an affirmation of faith in his covenant faithfulness, but falls short of declaring his fatherly approval smile, no commending voice, no inward manifestation of the divine favour'. This explanation is possible. It does not cast a slur on the character of Jesus like the first. Yet there seems to be an insuperable difficulty in the way of adopting it, namely that the words of Psalm 22:1 express an experience of being, and not just feeling, God-forsaken.

A third quite popular interpretation is to say that Jesus was uttering a cry of victory, the exact opposite of the first explanation, the cry of despair. The argument now is that, although Jesus quoted only the first verse of Psalm 22, he did so to represent the whole Psalm which begins and continues with an account of appalling sufferings, but ends with great confidence, and even triumph: 'I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you. You who fear the Lord, praise him! ... For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help' (vv. 22). This is ingenious but (it seems to me) far-fetched. Why should Jesus have quoted from the Psalm's beginning if in reality he was alluding to its end? It would seem rather perverse. Would anybody have understood his purpose?

The fourth explanation is simple and straightforward. It is to take the words at their face value and to understand them as a cry of real dereliction. I agree with Dale who wrote: 'I decline to accept any explanation of these words which implies that they do not represent the actual truth of our Lord's position.' Jesus had no need to repent of uttering a false cry. Up to this moment, though forsaken by men, he could add, 'Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me' (Jn. 16:32). In the darkness, however, he was absolutely alone, being now also God-forsaken. As Calvin put it, 'If Christ had died only a bodily death, it would have been ineffectual ... Unless his soul shared in the punishment, he would have been the Redeemer of bodies alone.' In consequence, 'he paid a greater and more excellent price in suffering in his soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man'. So then an actual and dreadful separation took place between the Father and the Son; it was voluntarily accepted by both the Father and the Son; it was due to our sins and their just reward; and Jesus expressed this horror of great darkness, this God-forsakenness, by quoting the only verse of Scripture which accurately described it, and which he had perfectly fulfilled, namely, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' The theological objections and problems we shall

28 E.g. Jos. 1:5; 9 and Is. 41:10.
come to later, although we already insist that the God-forsakenness of Jesus on the cross must be balanced with such an equally biblical assertion as 'God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ'. C. E. B. Cranfield is right to emphasize both the truth that Jesus experienced 'not merely a felt, but a real, abandonment by his Father' and 'the paradox that, while this God-forsakenness was utterly real, the unity of the Blessed Trinity was even then unbroken'. At this point, however, it is enough to suggest that Jesus had been meditating on Psalm 22, which describes the cruel persecution of an innocent and godly man, as he was meditating on other Psalms which he quoted from the cross; that he quoted verse 1 for the same reason that he quoted every other Scripture, namely that he believed he was fulfilling it; and that his cry was in the form of a question ('Why ... ?'), not because he did not know its answer, but only because the Old Testament text itself (which he was quoting) was in that form.

Almost immediately after the cry of dereliction, Jesus uttered three more words or sentences in quick succession. First, 'I am thirsty', his great spiritual sufferings having taken their toll of him physically. Secondly, he called out, again (according to Matthew and Mark) in a loud voice, 'It is finished.' And thirdly the tranquil, voluntary, confident self-commendation, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit,' as he breathed his last breath. The middle cry, the loud shout of victory, is in the Gospel text the single word tetelestai. Being in the perfect tense, it means 'it has been and will for ever remain finished'. We note the achievement Jesus claimed just before he died. It is not men who have finished their brutal deed; it is he who has accomplished what he came into the world to do. He has borne the sins of the world. Deliberately, freely and in perfect love he has endured the judgment in our place. He has procured salvation for us, established a new covenant between God and humankind, and made available the chief covenant blessing, the forgiveness of sins. At once the curtain of the Temple, which (which he was quoting) was in that form.

Thirty-six hours later God raised Jesus from the dead. He who had been condemned for us in his death, was publicly vindicated in his resurrection. It was God’s decisive demonstration that he had not died in vain.

All this presents a coherent and logical picture. It gives an explanation of the death of Jesus which takes into proper scientific account all the available data, without avoiding any. It explains the central importance which Jesus attached to his death, why he instituted his supper to commemorate it, and how by his death the new covenant has been ratified, with its promise of forgiveness. It explains his agony of anticipation in the garden, his anguish of dereliction on the cross, and his claim to have decisively accomplished our salvation. All these phenomena become intelligible if we accept the explanation given by Jesus and his apostles that 'he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree'.

In conclusion, the cross enforces three truths—about ourselves, about God and about Jesus Christ.

First, our sin must be extremely horrible. Nothing reveals the gravity of sin like the cross. For ultimately what sent Christ there was neither the greed of Judas, nor the envy of the priests, nor the vacillating cowardice of Pilate, but our own greed, envy, cowardice and other sins, and Christ’s resolve in love and mercy to bear their judgment and so put them away. It is impossible for us to face Christ’s cross with integrity and not to feel ashamed of ourselves. Apathy, selfishness and complacency blossom everywhere in the world except at the cross. There these noxious weeds shrivel and die. They are seen for the tatty, poisonous things they are. For if there was no way by which the righteous God could rightly forgive our unrighteousness, except that he should bear it himself in Christ, it must be serious indeed. It is only when we see this that, stripped of our self-righteousness and self-satisfaction, we are ready to put our trust in Jesus Christ as the Saviour we urgently need.

Secondly, God’s love must be wonderful beyond comprehension. God could quite justly have abandoned us to our fate. He could have left us alone to reap the fruit of our wrongdoing and to perish in our sins. It is what we deserved. But he did not. Because he loved us, he came after us in Christ. He pursued us even to the desolate anguish of the cross, where he bore our sin, guilt, judgment and death. It takes a hard and stony heart to remain unmoved by love like that. It is more than love. Its proper name is ‘grace’, which is love to the undeserving.

Thirdly, Christ’s salvation must be a free gift. He ‘purchased’ it for us at the high price of his own life-blood. So what is there left for us to pay? Nothing! Since he claimed that all was now ‘finished',

34 E.g. ‘I am thirsty’ (Jn. 19:28) is an allusion to Ps. 69:21 (cf. Ps. 22:15), and ‘Into your hands I commit my spirit’ (Lk. 23:46), a quotation of Ps. 31:5.
35 Jn. 19:28, 30; Lk. 23:46.
there is nothing for us to contribute. Not of course that we now have a licence to sin and can always count on God’s forgiveness. On the contrary, the same cross of Christ, which is the ground of a free salvation, is also the most powerful incentive to a holy life. But this new life follows. First, we have to humble ourselves at the foot of the cross, confess that we have sinned and deserve nothing at his hand but judgment, thank him that he loved us and died for us, and receive from him a full and free forgiveness. Against this self-humbling our ingrained pride rebels. We resent the idea that we cannot earn – or even contribute to – our own salvation. So we stumble, as Paul put it, over the stumbling-block of the cross.16

36 1 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 5:11; cf. Mt. 11:6; Rom. 9:32; 1 Pet. 2:8.