The Garden of Life and Death

by Desmond Ford

It was the most mysterious event the world had ever known. The most wonderfully pure of all human beings, the most holy of all men—overwhelmed with terror and horror!

Almost deranged, sweating blood among the cypress and olive trees in the Valley of Gethsemane, was One who had legions of angels that could be sent to him at any time. He was crying out to One whom he said was his Father.

What a mystery. That One so powerful in his heavenly Father should be so weak; One so good, suffering so. It is a mystery which, if understood, holds the key to all other mysteries.

God and Gardens

> A kiss of the sun for pardon,
> The song of the birds for mirth—
> One is nearer God's heart in a garden
> Than anywhere else on earth.
> (Dorothy Frances Gurney, *God's Garden*.)

Perhaps that is why the Scriptures make gardens so prominent at crucial points in history.

Mankind was ruined in a garden. It was also redeemed in a garden. "At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden" (Jn 19:41). Gethsemane was the beginning of our Lord's intense suffering—and that was a garden.

A garden is a place of shadows and sunshine, of shade and rest—and fruit. A garden tells the truth about resurrection. Every seed, every acorn, tells that story of death and beginning again.

We can look forward with hope because our Lord confronted the depths of despair. We can have joy because our Lord became a man of sorrows. We can have courage because he experienced overwhelming fear. We are promised the heights only because our Lord plumbed the depths.

Jesus and the Fear of Death

That bloody sweat, the later terrible cry, "My God, my God, why?" was to tell us that our Lord was not just fearful of physical suffering. Many have gone to death more calmly than Christ.

In the days of Henry IV of England, a vicious wretch about to be executed laughed and jeered all the way to the gallows. "Christ wept drops of blood with fear," he cried, "but look at me. I'm not afraid."

Was our Lord in his great agony so disturbed because he was afraid of death, or was there some reason far, far more significant? A reason in which we can find joy and life everlasting?

One—Jesus Overwhelmed by Sin's Enormity

The strange words in Scripture used to describe Christ's being sorrowful even unto death, used to describe his agitation, his derangement, tell us, first of all, that the horror of the nature of sin overwhelmed him. He saw sin in its enormity!

You and I are so used to sin. Our consciences are seared. We can hear profanity or impurity, read about war and murder, until it's commonplace.

Christ alone—the perfectly pure One—only he saw sin in all its horrid nature. And that overwhelmed him. In Gethsemane Jesus repented for the whole human race! What had been acted out at his baptism, at the beginning of his ministry, actually transpired in Gethsemane.

John refused to baptize Jesus until Jesus said, "No, it's appropriate. Let's do it to fulfill all righteousness."

Jesus acted out repentance. He acted out death as he went under the water. He acted out resurrection as he came up. Now, in Gethsemane, the acting out comes to pass.

Jesus repents for all mankind—an infinite repentance because he is the infinite One. Jesus was one person, but he had two natures. He was as much God as though not at all human, and as much human as though not at all God. Everything he suffered in Gethsemane he suffered in his divine nature as well as his human. Infinite depths of woe, an abyss of trauma! He saw the horror of sin in the garden, and he experienced the abandonment of God.

Two—Jesus Overwhelmed by Becoming a Curse

He experienced the full nature of the curse directed against humanity's disobedience of its Creator. He experienced what the Scriptures call "the second death" (Rev 20:14), which is the result of separation from God. The second death is not primarily physical (though its end result is physical). The second death is when the creature experiences, for the first time, the full awareness that it is separated from the Source of all life, goodness, and joy. Jesus went through the beginnings of the second death right there in Gethsemane.

Three—Jesus Overwhelmed by Powers of Darkness

Christ in Gethsemane was visited by specters from hell itself. That is why the Greek text uses a term which is appropriate for describing a person who has had such a fright that the hair stands on end!

So, behold him there—the center of satanic opposition (and divine rejection) because he represented you and me. He was there in our stead! We have said that Gethsemane is the mystery that explains all other mysteries. Once we understand the significance of the infinite pains of the God-man, we have the key to our pain. Once we understand the reason for his darkness, our darkness will be irradiated with glory!

Comparing the Transfiguration with Gethsemane

If you compare the Transfiguration with Gethsemane, you find a striking parallel. In both cases it was night. In both cases Christ is praying. In both cases he has taken with him the same three disciples. In both cases the disciples fall asleep. In both cases Christ comes and Peter speaks, and in both cases Peter does not know what he is saying!

In both cases Christ is visited: On the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah come, and an angel descends from heaven; in the Garden of Gethsemane, an

angel descends (Jn 18:6), and demons from hell are present. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus' face is irradiated with glory; but in the Garden, it is transfigured with agony. Gethsemane represents the opposite of the Mount.

Life has not only its mountain peak experiences. It has its depths and its valleys. Here is the reality of life: life is a matter of suffering *and* glory; life is a matter of darkness *and* light; health *and* sickness; ecstatic songs *and* funeral dirges.

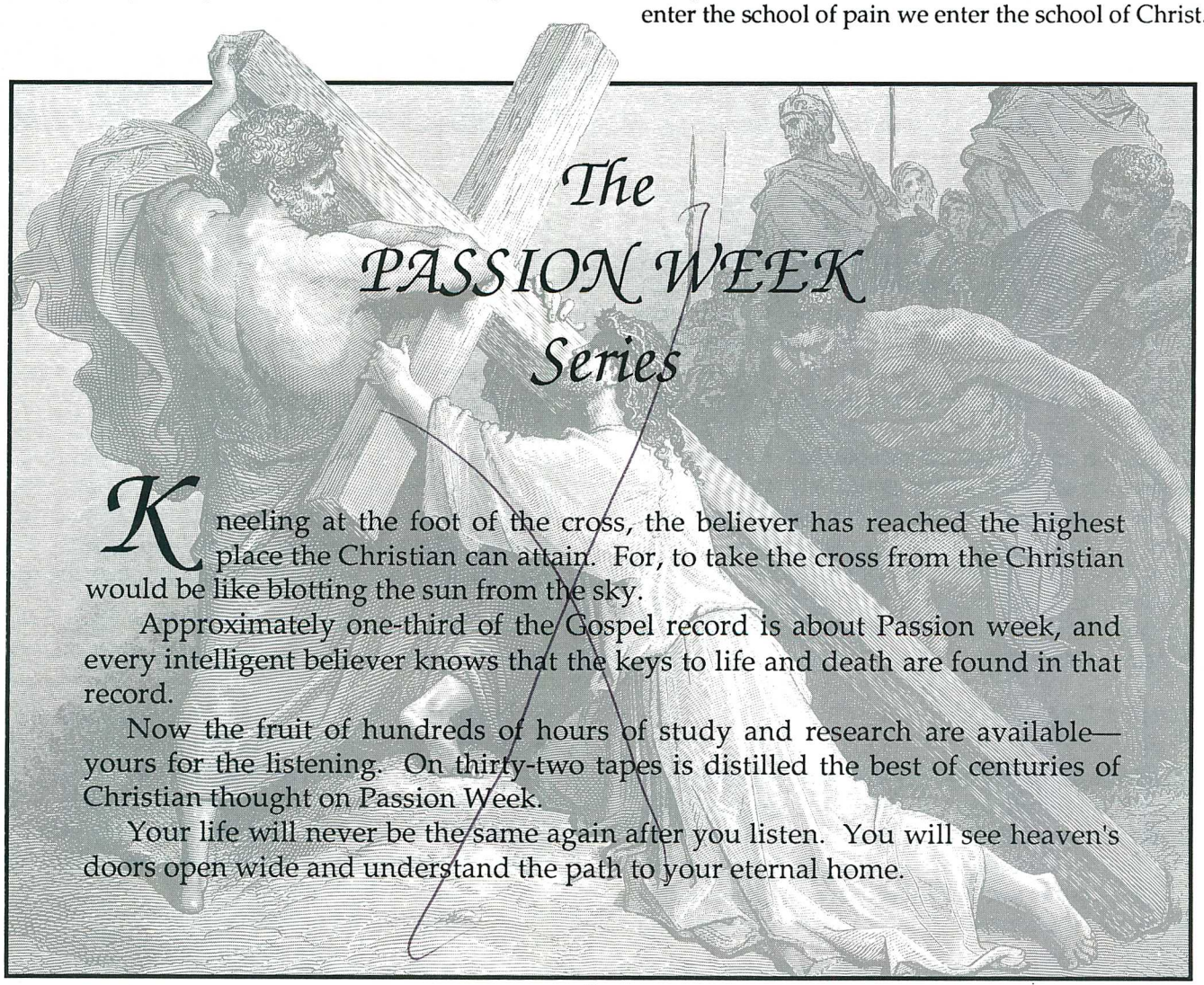
Christ's Sufferings Redemptive

The sufferings of Christ in Gethsemane were not the sufferings of an ordinary man. Jesus did not tremble because of physical fear. Christ, the Master, did not face death with less courage than his servants, Peter and Stephen. They went to death with a calm joy and courage; Christ went to death with agitation, confusion, and depression.

Only one key can explain it all: "Christ redeemed us . . . by becoming a curse for us" (Gal 3:13). "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21).

What joy to understand that if God has already exacted the penalty of my sin, I need not fear Judgment Day. God will not require the penalty twice: once at the hand of my bleeding Surety, and then at mine. What wonderful joy! One can sing, 'Hallelujah!' to know that the penalty for past sin, present sin, future sin, has already been borne by the Lamb of God. There's the glorious hub of the gospel—that our Lord suffered for us that we might have his righteousness, his glory, his everlasting life.

Christ Redeems Our Sufferings

Not only does Gethsemane give us the key to our problem of guilt, but it is also a comfort for our lesser sorrows. When Luther found that God had suffered for him that he might be counted righteous, he cried, "Lord, strike now. Do whatever you like to me. Now my sins are gone, I don't care! I can put up with anything now, Lord—the rack, burning at the stake, anything—now my sins are gone." Once we have solved the sin problem, other things are much smaller.

In the record about Gethsemane, it says of Jesus, "Going a little farther" (Mt 26:39). Jesus always goes a little further than we go. He's known more pain, more trauma, more anxiety, more agitation of mind, more disappointment, more depression. Gethsemane assures us that pain does not mean we are abandoned. When we enter the school of pain we enter the school of Christ. ❖