

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, July 10, 1994, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

### **MATTHEW 27:34**

“Then when they came to a place called Golgotha they offered Him a drink of wine mixed with some bitter drug; but when He had tasted it He refused to drink.”

### **THE ONE CUP FROM WHICH CHRIST WOULD NOT DRINK**

Crucifixion was a dreadful doom. It was the hangman’s rope of the ancient world. It was invented by the Phoenicians, a most cruel race of people; and later it was borrowed by the Romans who, however, would not allow any Roman citizen to be put to death in such torture. The cross was reserved for condemned slaves and for the vilest of criminals in the Roman provinces. “This most cruel, most hideous of punishments,” Cicero called it.

Usually the victim was fastened to his cross before it was planted in the ground. After being stripped of his clothing, he was laid upon this instrument of torture; and first of all, his hands were nailed to the crossbar; then the arms were roped to the beam to prevent the hands from tearing away from the nails which fastened them. In the middle of the upright beam there was a narrow shelf or saddle on which the body was made to rest for support; and finally, the feet were nailed to the base of the upright. Then the cross with its quivering load was lifted up, dropped into the socket of earth prepared for it; the earth was then filled in and packed down, and the poor wretch was left to hang, fevered with pain and parched with thirst until death came as a merciful deliverer.

The torture was unspeakable. Our English word “excruciating” is derived from the Latin word “crux” which means a “cross.” The death of the cross was, in fact, the most agonizing form of death which fiendish ingenuity could devise. The Jews hated such cruelty, and it was a custom amongst certain wealthy and charitable ladies of Jerusalem to provide a drug for those poor wretches condemned to be crucified. It was a mixture of wine and certain narcotics, to dull the terrible pain and to act as a crude anaesthetic. These ladies took as their motto the words of Proverbs 31:6, “Give strong drink to him who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress.”

When Jesus reached the place of execution on that Good Friday morning, the kindly ladies were already there, and stepping forward, they offered Him the cup they had prepared for Him. But no sooner had He tasted it than He realized what it was, and very graciously but very deliberately He declined it. It was the one and only cup which He refused to drink. I wonder why He refused to drink it? His action in declining it reveals, I believe, in a very striking manner, His own personal attitude toward His sufferings and death.

#### **1. He knew that the drinking of that drug would have marred the crowning work of His life.**

Some people look upon Jesus as a martyr, hounded to His death by wicked men; but that is a very shallow conception of our Lord’s death. The early disciples never looked upon the

Cross in that way at all. The Cross was not something done to Jesus by wicked men: It was something done by Jesus for sinful men. It was a work — His crowning service — His eternal triumph over the powers of evil. All he had come to do was crowned in this last glorious service of the Cross. He took a Cross and made it His throne. He transformed a brutal murder into the salvation of His people.

Now, when a man is facing a great task, does he drug his faculties with dope? Does the fighter pilot do that before taking to the air to meet the enemy? Does the surgeon do that before he performs a delicate and arduous operation? Of course not. A man must be at his best as he faces a supreme task. The Cross for Christ was a great work to be done, His crowning work, the work which would enable poor sinful humanity to call Him Savior.

Think of what we would have lost had Jesus accepted the proffered cup! We would have missed those seven last glorious words from the Cross. Our Lord could never have accomplished His work of reconciliation perfectly, and forever had He drugged His senses with the cup that was so kindly offered.

## **2. Our Lord died of His own free will.**

You remember how He said, “No one takes My life from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord.” (John 10:18) The infinite value of our Lord’s death lay in the fact that it was an entirely voluntary sacrifice. He chose to die of His own free will.

But the effect of a drug is to take away the freedom of the will. When a man leaves a tavern with a liberal amount of alcoholic poison flowing through his veins, he may try to walk in a straight line, but he can’t! He can only roll and stumble along; he might even fall. He may try to talk sensibly and even profoundly, but silly nonsense may be all that will fall from his lips. And if he should be foolish enough to get behind the wheel of a car, he would be a disaster waiting to happen. Under the influence of the drug he has lost his self-control; he has been robbed of the freedom of his will; he is no longer free to act as he wishes.

That was why Jesus could not drink the drugged cup. If he had been stupefied by it, then He would not have died of His own free choice; and that He had do at all cost.

## **3. He wanted to be a Savior Who could help us when we face our Calvary.**

Aren’t we often called upon to suffer what often seems to us to be a personal Calvary? And usually no drug is offered to alleviate the pain. Of course, no matter how devastating our suffering might be, it could never compare with what our Lord endured for us. Nevertheless, recurring and painful illness, profound sorrow, crushing disappointments and torturing frustration do take their toll of each of us; and if Jesus had hung, semi-conscious upon His Cross, having refused to bear its agony to the full, how could He be our Friend and Savior when we also walk the road to our Golgotha? But thank God He resolved to be our Brother down to the very depths of human agony.

Listen to the writer to the Hebrews as he assures us that “we do not have a high priest

who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have One Who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15) The old Scottish paraphrase of this passage puts it so beautifully when it says,

Our fellow sufferer yet retains  
A fellow-feeling of our pains;  
And still remembers in the skies  
His tears, His agonies and cries.  
In every pang that rends the heart  
The Man of Sorrows had a part;  
He sympathizes with our grief,  
And to the sufferer sends relief.”

Some time ago a fine Christian gentleman lay dying of a terribly painful disease. As his stricken relatives stooped to catch his whispered words, what they heard was this — “He suffered more for me!”

Dr. David Smith, in his “Disciples’ Commentary,” suggests that perhaps Jesus alone of the three condemned men was offered the drugged cup. As the crude anaesthetic was reached to Him, He noticed the two abandoned ruffians eyeing it wistfully. For them, outside the pale of sympathy and of mercy, no numbing anaesthetic had been provided. So, Jesus at once utterly refused to accept a relief which was denied to His companions in misery.

A number of years ago an old lady was laid to rest in a quiet little cemetery in Canada. She had come to Canada as a small child with her family. Shortly after their arrival she was stricken with polio which left her a permanent cripple. No one ever thought she would marry, but when she was in her late twenties, she met and fell in love with a college student. Together they worked and saved until he could finish his university courses; and their joy knew no bounds when he graduated with honors and was appointed as an assistant professor in a small American college. They had been there about a year when a student came to her one morning to say that her husband had been stricken with a heart attack and had died instantly. It would have been little wonder if her life had shriveled into bitterness. But she knew Christ as her loving, caring Savior and wisely looked upon her sorrow as a sacramental sharing with Him in His Cross and agony. She came back to the small town of her childhood, put her savings into a little library, and year after year added to that community the rich influences of great literature. Many a person was helped into spiritual blessing by sitting beside her wheelchair listening to her words and seeing the beauty and Christ-likeness of her life.

That is what Christ can do for a person who is forced to drain the cup of suffering. And that is why He refused the proffered cup: That is why He had to suffer to the uttermost, and drink the cup of disappointment, pain, and shame to the bitter dregs. Because he has suffered, He can truly sympathize with us, and inspire and strengthen us when we are called upon to face the cruel batterings of life.

Our blessed Lord does not regret His sufferings, for as a result of what He endured, He has made it possible for us poor helpless sinners, in our spiritual rags, to be welcomed home to

our Father's house; for on the Cross He took our place and bore our sins.

The only thing that causes Him to suffer still is the knowledge that some who have heard the good news of His dying and undying love still refuse his aid and His salvation.

Blaise Pascal, in a sentence of deep insight, exclaims, "Jesus will be in an agony until the end of the world!" It is the agony of being rejected by those whom He came to save.

May each of us help to lessen his agony by offering Him our sins that they may be washed away in His precious blood; by offering Him our talents, our devotion, our will, that they may be used by Him; by offering Him our all, that we may glorify Him in our mortal bodies! May we let down our anchor now, while the sea of life is calm, so that when the storms come, our souls may ride out the tempest, because we belong to Christ, and He belongs to us!

Remember the words of the old Gospel hymn —

“Will your anchor hold in the storms of life,  
When the clouds unfold their wings of strife?  
When the strong tides lift, and the cables strain,  
Will your anchor drift, or firm remain?”

We have an anchor that keeps the soul  
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll;  
Fastened to the Rock that cannot move,  
Grounded firm and deep in the Savior's love!”

**AMEN!**