

The Significance of Gethsemane

To understand the soul-cry of our Lord and God who pleaded to his Father to take away his “cup” (or lot which had befallen him), you need to have in mind some idea of the weight that was upon him. The Redeemer himself has provided a vivid description for us in a latter-day revelation to Joseph Smith:

20. Wherefore, I command you again to repent, lest I humble you with my almighty power; and that you confess your sins, lest you suffer these punishments of which I have spoken, of which in the smallest, yea, even in the least degree you have tasted at the time I withdrew my Spirit. (D&C 19:20.)

The revelation was given to Martin Harris, who had been responsible for the loss of 116 pages of the manuscript of the translation of the Nephite record. It had been only through sore repentance that he had become one of the three witnesses. On this occasion, the Lord commanded Martin to repent of subsequent transgressions lest he suffer the same punishment as endured by the Savior in Gethsemane, “which in the smallest, ... in the least degree you have tasted at the time I withdrew my Spirit.”

Joseph Smith’s mother provides an account of the anguish faced by Martin when the Spirit was withdrawn:

“When Joseph had taken a little nourishment, ... he requested us to send immediately for Mr. Harris. This we did without delay. ... we commenced preparing breakfast for the family; and we supposed that Mr. Harris would be there, as soon as it was ready, to eat with us, for he generally came in such haste when he was sent for. At eight o’clock we set the victuals on the table, as we were expecting him every moment. We waited till nine, and he came not—till ten, and he was not there—till eleven, still he did not make his appearance. But at half past twelve we saw him walking with a slow and measured tread towards the house, his eyes fixed thoughtfully upon the ground. On coming to the gate, he stopped, instead of passing through, and got upon the fence, and sat there some time with his hat drawn over his eyes. At length he entered the house. Soon after which we sat down to the table, Mr. Harris with the rest. He took up his knife and fork as if he were going to use them, but immediately dropped them. Hyrum, observing this, said ‘Martin, why do you not eat; are you sick?’ Upon which Mr. Harris pressed his hands upon his temples, and cried out in a tone of deep anguish, ‘Oh, I have lost my soul! I have lost my soul!’

“Joseph who had not expressed his fears till now, sprang from the table, exclaiming, ‘Martin, have you lost that manuscript? Have you broken your oath, and brought down condemnation upon my head as well as your own?’

“‘Yes; it is gone,’ replied Martin, ‘and I know not where.’

“‘Oh, my God!’ said Joseph, clinching his hands. ‘All is lost! all is lost! What shall I do? I have sinned—it is I who tempted the wrath of God. I should have been satisfied with the first answer which I received from the Lord; for he told me that it was not safe to let the writing go out of my possession.’ He wept and groaned, and walked the floor continually. At length he told Martin to go back and search again.

“‘No’; said Martin, ‘it is all in vain; for I have ripped open beds and pillows; and I know it is not there.’

“‘Then must I,’ said Joseph, ‘return with such a tale as this? I dare not do it. And how shall I appear before the Lord? Of what rebuke am I not worthy from the angel of the Most High?’

“I besought him not to mourn so, for perhaps the Lord would forgive him, after a short season of humiliation and repentance. But what could I do to

comfort him, when he saw all the family in the same situation of mind as himself; for sobs and groans, and the most bitter lamentations filled the house. However, Joseph was more distressed than the rest, as he better understood the consequences of disobedience. And he continued pacing back and forth, meantime weeping and grieving, until about sunset, when, by persuasion, he took a little nourishment. ...

“I well remember that day of darkness, both within and without. To us, at least, the heavens seemed clothed with blackness, and the earth shrouded with gloom. I have often said within myself, that if a continual punishment, as severe as that which we experienced on that occasion, were to be inflicted upon the most wicked characters who ever stood upon the footstool of the Almighty—if even their punishment were no greater than that, I should feel to pity their condition.” (Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, pp. 127–32.)

Such is a picture of a mortal man who had experienced “in the least degree” the withdrawal of the Lord’s Spirit. Have similar experiences caused anguish to your soul? President Joseph Fielding Smith typified such suffering in this manner:

“I have known of men and have had men come to me—big, strong, husky fellows—trembling with mental torment because of their sins, wondering if there was any way possible for them to get relief. They have come in the anguish of their souls.” (“For Ye Are Bought with a Price,” *Speeches of the Year, 1957*, p. 5.)

If you can recall in your own life at least one occasion where you have acutely felt the withdrawal of the Spirit of the Lord from you and the suffering you experienced at that time, you can then begin to glimpse the significance of what the Savior experienced. ... President Joseph Fielding Smith summarized it in this way:

“There isn’t one of us I take it that hasn’t done something wrong and then been sorry and wished we hadn’t. Then our consciences strike us and we have been very, very miserable.

“Have you gone through that experience? I have. ... But here we have the Son of God carrying the burden of my transgressions and your transgressions and the transgressions of every soul that receives the gospel of Jesus Christ. ... he carried the burden—our burden. I added something to it; so did you. So did everybody else. He took it upon himself to pay the price that I might escape—that you might escape—the punishment on the conditions that we will receive his gospel and be true and faithful in it.” (“Fall, Atonement, Resurrection, Sacrament,” *Address delivered at the Salt Lake Institute of Religion [U. of U.]*, 14 Jan. 1961, p. 8.)

No mortal could have endured such pain, but Jesus was no mere mortal. His capacity to endure consisted of all the mental, physical, and spiritual endowments of his parentage: one parent being an infinite and eternal being—God the Father; the other being mortal and subject to infirmity—Mary. His capability to bear the excruciating pain, “more than man can suffer,” was possible because he was the only Being born into the world who was infinite and eternal, but who also had the power to lay down his life if he willed to do so.

This “spiritual agony of soul,” wrote Elder James E. Talmage, was such “as only a God was capable of experiencing. No other man, however great his powers of physical or mental endurance, could have suffered so; for his human organism would have succumbed.” (*Jesus the Christ*, p. 613.)

As you ponder what you have had to endure, and contemplate the times when “in the least degree” you suffered the pangs of spiritual loss, remember and reverence Him whom you have covenanted to remember always.