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ORDEAL IN A GARDEN

By Ron Allen

In the movie, 'Dead Man Walking,' there's an excruciating scene as Matthew Poncelet's family comes to visit him in jail the day before the death penalty is carried out for his crime of rape and murder. The visit is strictly supervised. Matthew and his family make painful small talk. Their distress is palpable. The specter of a failed life and its imminent doom haunts the room. Loved ones suffer quietly; their eyes telegraph grief and dread.

A little boy is there, the condemned's brother. He says nothing, and distracts himself by skidding his new sneakers on the brightly polished linoleum. Every step makes a discordant screech; the soundtrack of an unfolding nightmare. The boy is too immature to grasp the gravity and consequence of the moment. He persists in his movement; every shriek of his shoes jangling taunt nerves and inundating breaking hearts with fresh torrents of agony.

A scene with similar overtones occurs in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus has celebrated the Passover with his disciples. Late at night, he and the other twelve make their way to an olive grove to the east of the city. As they enter the garden Jesus displays signs of extreme distress. "My soul is



...he and the other twelve make their way to an olive grove...

overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," (Mark 14:34) he tells the disciples. Horror clutches at him. He appears in dread of something quite terrible and he warns his disciples accordingly: "Stay here and keep watch," he says. Dropping to the ground, he begins to pray to God for rescue from the ordeal that presses so violently upon him. He looks to the twelve for some sign of moral support but they have nothing. They have no appreciation of what is happening to him. Like little children, they are ignorant and immature. As Jesus stumbles under the weight of a nameless sorrow, they all fall asleep.

The Gethsemane drama belongs to a cluster of devices in Mark's narrative which he uses to show how alone Jesus was when he came to his crisis; how utterly bereft of confidant or colleague he was in his life's defining episode.

The first means for highlighting Jesus' solitary passage takes the form of three of his disciples—Peter, James and John. As he enters the olive grove, he separates them from the rest of

the group. Their separation from the larger band is intelligible in light of earlier events recorded by Mark.

At the raising of the Synagogue ruler's daughter, Jesus put everyone out of the house except Peter, James and John (Mark 5). When he was visually glorified on the Mountain (Mark 9), the three were the only disciples to see it, and Jesus told them to keep it to themselves till after he had risen from the dead.

Two of the three—James and John—had distinguished themselves from the others (Mark 10) by asking Jesus for choice cabinet postings when his kingdom was established. "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus had replied.

Fast forward now, to Gethsemane. The inaugural event for the expected kingdom is under way. James and John are there, and it is not what they had in mind. Far from being celebratory and jubilant, it is for Jesus, grueling and toilsome. He is entering into his glory. The two erstwhile political aspirants who had previously expressed eagerness—are sleeping through it!

During their oblivion, Jesus prays, "Father, take this cup from me" (Mark 14:35). That prayer also recalls the occasion of James and John's ambitious request for eminent positions in Christ's kingdom. Jesus had said: "Can you drink the cup I drink?"

"We can," they chorused. Now, the anticipated moment has come. Jesus' whole life has been leading toward 'the cup.' Henceforth he will be remembered, known, understood, believed in, loved, worshiped and served, because he drinks this cup. As the cup comes to lips, those who solemnly averred, they too would drink, left him to do it alone.

Mark's second device for emphasizing Jesus' isolation at the critical hour of his career is Peter. Peter, one of the three. He stands out from the twelve because of his brashness. He is something of a 'loudmouth.' At the Passover meal just concluded, Jesus had said that the disciples would desert him (Mark 14:27). Peter vociferously disputed Jesus' prophecy. "All these others might desert you, but not me," he contended. "Yes you will," Jesus assured him. "Even if I die with you I will not desert you," (Mark 14:31) argued Peter. Then all the others chimed in and said the same.

After warning the three to be vigilant, Jesus returns from prayer to find them asleep. He singles out Peter: "Peter, are you asleep; couldn't you keep vigil with me for one hour?"

The irony is biting and raw. Here is a man prepared to back his

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EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Mark 14:34).

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, a terrible war was fought between Democratic Republic of Armenia and the Turkish National Movement. The conflict introduced the modern world to genocide. One-and-a-half million Armenians were exterminated.

During that terrible time, a Turkish officer took part in a raid on an Armenian home. The aged mother and father were shot. The daughters were shared among the soldiers for their pleasure. The eldest daughter was aged twenty. The officer took her for himself and kept her for the sole purpose of venting his lusts. Eventually, she escaped from him and made her way to a refugee camp for Armenians run by the British.

Her rescuers gave her work to do as a nurse among her own people in the camp hospital. She was later transferred to another hospital where some wounded Turkish soldiers were also receiving care. On her first shift, she was moving through the ward past wounded men when her eyes fixed on a face she knew only too well. It was the officer who had killed her parents, torn apart her family and repeatedly desecrated her. She froze; her heart racing.

The officer was dangerously ill. He lay unconscious. It would have been so easy for her to pay him a little less attention than he required; thereby assuring his death. She

fought with her outrage; her natural inclination to have her revenge. But she could not yield to it. She was in bondage to the will of another.

Her mind made up, she spent the rest of the night doing what she could to save the life of her tormentor. At daylight, he regained consciousness. The doctor came to see him. “You owe your life to this nurse,” said the doctor, pointing to his victim. The wounded officer looked at the nurse and immediately recognized her. His face went white. When the doctor had left he asked her, “Why didn’t you kill me?” “Because cruelty cannot be made right with more cruelty,” she replied. “I am a follower of One who asked us to love our enemies.”

Man’s ability to create evil is huge. Our failure is endemic, appalling and tragic. One thing is certain: techniques, policies and practices that are only an extension of the problem, cannot be employed in our deliverance. There needs to be something entirely new and unexpected. In Gethsemane, the failure and offences of the world pressed down on Jesus and crushed him. He did not return evil for evil. He *bore* it.

The path taken by Jesus was chosen also by the Armenian nurse. It was not easy—love never is—but it’s the only course that brings life and light into the world.



Continued from previous page

own courage, loyalty and commitment to principle above that of his peers. “*Couldn’t you keep vigil with me for one hour?*” The answer is, of course, no. He couldn’t. Neither could any of the others. A little later, Jesus is arrested by the temple guards. Then the full meaning of the disciples’ drowsiness during Jesus’ struggle is laid bare—they *all* deserted him and fled.

Now the third means for underlining the disciples’ lack of appreciation for what was happening to Jesus and what he was doing, comes into view. The twelve run for their lives, and here Mark supplies a detail not included by the other Evangelists. He reports the presence of a young man wearing nothing but a linen garment. He is not named, but he is a follower of Jesus. When Jesus is seized, this young man runs off in such a hurry that he leaves his clothes behind. He fled naked (Mark 14:51).

The Garden of Gethsemane is where the central issue of Jesus’ existence reached its moment of truth. From the time he first became a public figure, Jesus was dogged by the

temptation to abandon the will of God. “*You are my Son whom I love, I am well pleased with you,*” said the divine voice at his baptism. But immediately he was assailed by a battery of temptations to exchange the will of his Father for the pragmatic ways of the World and its Prince.

Jesus was Jewish. He shared the Jewish consciousness; the self-understanding of a people that knew of a surety that God had spoken to them and taught them things other nations had not been privileged to learn. It must have been ever so hard for Jesus *not* to yield to the desire to please his generation of Abraham’s children.

The disciples had been astonished by Jesus’ sober determination to go to Jerusalem where he expected to be rejected and killed (Mark 10:32). The idea made them afraid. Peter took it upon himself to rebuke Jesus and to assure him that such things would not be permitted to happen. Wasn’t he the Christ? But instead of thanking Peter for his concern, Jesus rebuked him for his ignorance of God’s ways.

In Gethsemane, all the opportunities to forgo his mission that have ever been resisted by Jesus gather about him in →

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combined momentum to launch one more shuddering assault. *"If it is possible, let this cup pass; if not, your will be done"* (Mark 14:36). So praying, Jesus commits again to the will of God, even against his own desperate wish for an alternate possibility.

"It is enough" (Mark 14:41), he says. 'It is settled.' The final choice is made. The narrative from this point turns to the disciples who do *not* choose the way of Jesus. As they come from the garden where they have slept, their discipleship unravels. What Jesus had foreseen comes to pass with terrible precision. Confusion and fear envelops them and they all forsake their leader.

Jesus had said: *"My food and drink is to do the will of him that sent me"* (John 4:34). Now the disciples begin to realize how far Jesus is willing to go with that. He sticks to his watchword so closely that he puts himself at risk and becomes a danger to his followers. A life lived as unto God can land a person in a lot of trouble.

The will of God; what is it? Certainly, it is not a thing that has nothing to do with life as we must live it. God's will is his will for human beings. It speaks to working, eating, drinking, mating, resting, and deciding. The will of God is meaningless unless it takes places within the structures of existence where men and women interact with each other; between husband and wife, neighbor and neighbor, citizen and official, employer and employee, client and provider. The will of God finds expression within the fabric of relationship of which society is comprised and on which our common life depends.

To be always doing the things that pleased his father, was for Jesus a certain way of thinking about, dealing with and responding to, human beings. And Jesus' way was the way of love. It meant seeking the well-being of every individual. It made no difference whether the person was a beggar or a high priest, a thief of a wealthy businessman. He treated each one as a center of infinite worth, and cast himself in the role of that person's servant.

Because he was driven by love for everyone, Jesus was maligned for being friendly with tax gatherers, prostitutes, drop-outs and traitors. Those who complained about him and who ultimately conspired to kill him did so because he was so friendly to people they routinely shunned. The



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compassion of Jesus was never more in vogue than when he was dealing with the unlovely and the obnoxious. He sought to do good to wretched types whom everyone else had given up on. He valued the despised, the broken and the hated. He came to *seek and to save the lost*.



He came to seek and to save the lost.

This is what it was for Jesus to do God's will: bring love to bear on every person, every soul, every relationship, every situation, every joy, every sorrow, every task and duty, every problem, and bad habit. In every direction, Jesus shined the light of love's myriad nuances: patience, kindness, goodness, trust, truth, hope and peace.

But the world's political and religious leaders hated him for it. Such love was an affront to their narrow ambitions and self-serving religion. Even Jesus' closest followers saw where love of this caliber was leading, so they ran away.

Throughout the last dramatic weeks of Jesus' life, culminating in Gethsemane, Jesus sees repeatedly that his disciples misunderstand him. Yet, he is not angry toward them. He encourages every sign of love in them no matter how feeble. In predicting that Peter and all the others will turn away from him, he is not bitter, only sad. Even then he does not give up on them, but promises to meet them in Galilee when his ordeal is over. And when he gasps in horror beneath his load of temptation, he is still thinking of his disciples. He knows his crisis will test them and he encourages them to be vigilant. Several times, despite his torment, he comes to them, mindful of their welfare, knowing that *their spirit is willing but their flesh is weak*. So Jesus values people; despite their weakness, despite their failure and their shame.

Jesus' experience teaches us human failure is vast and complete. The one sure place for us to stand is outside of that failure; outside of our best intentions. All our vows of fidelity are weak plants in poor soil. In Gethsemane, divine love confronts threadbare human integrity, and becomes the vital truth to which all failure can be safely tied.

"All we like sheep have gone astray, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).



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AFTER DARKNESS—THE DAWN

By Desmond Ford

In Matthew 26:39 we read: “Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed.” However deep we may be in darkness, remember Jesus went further. However tragic our agony, let us remember he experienced something much worse. His feet have pressed down every thorn that threatens us. When the text says Christ was “*deeply distressed and troubled,*” let us remember that the Greek expression found here is appropriate for a man who has had such a fright as to make his hair stand on end. He is suffering the agonies of the lost. Their hell is the shocking awareness of separation from God forever. This is the mystery that solves all other mysteries. Once we understand the significance of the infinite pain of the God-man, we have the key to our pain. Once we understand the reason for his darkness, our darkness is irradiated with glory.

Either the Gethsemane-Calvary event was the worse thing the universe has ever seen—the denial of the righteous government of the cosmos, an annihilation of the view of a holy God, the end of Christianity’s claims to be good and true and just—or it was the fairest light, the most glorious illumination that has ever been shed upon the path of sinners. When Luther discovered that God had suffered so that he, Martin the sinner, might be counted righteous, he said, “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, the stake, anything—now my sins are gone.”

Gethsemane and Calvary tell us that pain does not mean we are alone. The cry, “My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?” assures us that we can feel forsaken when we are not. Gethsemane and Calvary tell us that there is a morning for those who endure the long night...

Have you noticed that all the marks of the Edenic curse are found in Gethsemane and Calvary? When Adam sinned he was told, “In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou labor.... Thorns and thistles will the ground bring forth.” And so in the Gethsemane account we see these marks of the curse: Christ sweats blood, and before Calvary, a crown of thorns is placed upon him.

Guilty Adam found a sword barring the way to the Tree of Life. In Gethsemane came men with drawn swords to take

Christ. Eve had been told in Eden: “In sorrow shalt thou conceive.” So Christ becomes a man of sorrows in this garden...

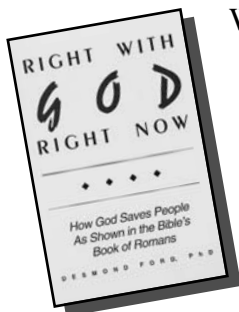
The agony of the garden prepared Christ for the agony of the Cross. It was a rehearsal as well as a beginning. Gethsemane was the rehearsal; Calvary was the reality. Gethsemane was the anticipation; Calvary was the accomplishment. In Gethsemane we behold the will, at Calvary the work. In Gethsemane Christ sealed his destiny and made the final decision...

Mankind was ruined in a garden, but it was also redeemed in a garden. John 19:41 states: “*In the place where Jesus was crucified there was a garden.*” Gethsemane witnessed the commencement of our Lord’s atoning sufferings, and Gethsemane was a garden. A garden is a place of sunshine and shadows, of shade and rest and fruit. Every garden tells the resurrection truth. For every seed, every acorn, tells of death and renewed life.

-Desmond Ford: JESUS ONLY, pp. 126-130. 



Gethsemane and Calvary tell us that there is a morning for those who endure the long night...



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