
The Cup Jesus Would Not Drink

“And when they came to a place called Golgotha, which means Place of a Skull, they gave Him wine to drink mixed with gall; and after tasting it, He was unwilling to drink” (Matthew 27:33, 34).

Just before Jesus was nailed to the cross, He was offered a sedative, a type of wine to numb the awful pain that He would experience when His body was fastened to the cross with the nails. When He tasted what was being given to Him, He turned away His head and spat out the liquid, refusing to drink it.

The Scriptures mention three “cups” that Jesus faced in connection with His death on the cross. He confronted *the cup of God’s wrath* in stark reality in the Garden of Gethsemane. As He looked closely at its contents, He prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this *cup* pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will” (Matthew 26:39; emphasis mine). When Jesus arose from His final period of prayer in this garden, He was committed to drinking this cup completely.

The second cup that Jesus confronted was *the cup of sedation*, a cup that would have a numbing effect upon Him, depriving Him of clarity of mind. Perhaps routinely, when crucifying a person, the soldiers would give the victim some kind of drink to deaden the initial pain of crucifixion. Lemuel wrote in the final chapter of Proverbs, “Give strong drink to him who is perishing, and wine to him whose life is bitter” (Proverbs 31:6). Jewish tradition says that kindhearted women in Jerusalem customarily provided wine mixed with myrrh or another deadening property for condemned prisoners to drink just before they were executed.

Toward the end of His torturous six hours on the cross, Jesus called for another cup,

a cup of refreshment. According to John, He said, “I am thirsty” (John 19:28). The soldiers had a jar of sour wine available for their use. A kind hand took some of the wine, put it on a sponge, and lifted it to His lips. Jesus “received the sour wine” (John 19:30). This was the only personal request that Jesus made from the cross, and it was granted by some nameless person beneath the cross who heard His appeal for a sip of something to quench His thirst.

Of the second of these three cups, the one Jesus rejected, Matthew said, “They gave Him wine to drink mixed with gall; and after tasting it, He was unwilling to drink” (Matthew 27:34). Mark wrote, “They tried to give Him wine mixed with myrrh; but He did not take it” (Mark 15:23). The “gall” mentioned by Matthew must be a figurative term for “bitterness,” while the “myrrh” mentioned by Mark names the specific substance that produced the bitter taste. The myrrh could act as a narcotic, providing some numbness to His mind and body. When Jesus realized what He was being offered, He refused to drink it.

During His last hour on the cross, Jesus asked for a drink with the words “I am thirsty.” John said that He made such a request in order to fulfill an Old Testament prophecy (John 19:28). He was no doubt referring to Psalm 69:21b: “And for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” The writer of this psalm was describing an awful trial that he was going through, but the Holy Spirit guided his words for a much higher purpose, using them to picture one aspect of Jesus’ sufferings upon the cross.

The psalm also mentions the “gall”: “They also gave me gall for my food” (Psalm 69:21a). No Gospel writer pointed to this phrase as being fulfilled in Jesus’ being given the wine mixed with gall as He was being prepared for crucifixion. However, it could well be that Jesus’ rejecting the drink that was first offered to Him was being pictured by the psalmist’s phrase even as was the third cup, the cup of refreshment, by the latter part of the same verse.

As Jesus turned away His head and refused to drink the sedation that they were trying to give Him, we see a brief glimpse of how He was thinking just before they drove the nails into His hands and feet. His thoughts may be described in three words.

The first word is “resolution.” By His refusal, Jesus was expressing His resolve to fulfill the commitment that He had made in the garden. He had told the Father, “Not My will but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42). He was carrying through with His decision to drink the cup completely. He would not partially sip it; He would swallow all of it, down to the last drop. If the cross was His Father’s will, then Jesus would not omit any part of it.

The second word is “determination.” Jesus was determined to be clear-headed and as conscious as He could be as He performed the sacred offering of Himself for our sins. He knew that what was taking place was the greatest event of all time. He was becoming the Lamb of God for the sins of the world. He was giving Himself “once for all” as an atonement for sin. We read,

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit (1 Peter 3:18; see Hebrews 7:27; 9:12).

He would not fulfill God’s eternal plan in a daze or in a state of semiconsciousness. He wanted to be alert enough to think, pray, and save the sinful man next to Him.

The third word is “discipline.” Think of the self-control that was manifested by the Son of God as He turned away from a cup that could have deadened His pain at least a little bit! He remained in total control of what was happening. He scorned the values of this world

and the comforts of His body in order to carry out God’s will with rigid and righteous discipline.

We have seen Christ’s great resolve before. As His earthly ministry drew to its close, Luke said, “When the days were approaching for His ascension, He was determined to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). The word for “determined” is *sterizo* (στηρίζω), which is a strong word that means “to set one’s mind with determination, to fix, to resolve steadfastly, or to put firmly into place.” The ASV and the KJV say, “He steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem.” The NIV has “Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.” Jesus had turned His face toward Jerusalem, and no one could prevent Him from going to that place.

Here, at the cross, we see an even greater picture of His resolve. As He entered into its torture and agony, He spat out the numbing wine and maintained a clear, holy mind that would be alert to God’s will and plan. At the moment He was to be nailed to the cross, Jesus turned toward all the fury of the cross and said, “Consciously and in full control of My senses, I am ready to bear all the pain that you will place upon Me.”

Our Lord’s refusal of the bitter, narcotic wine is one action that is often overlooked in studies of the cross. It appears at first to be an incidental response, a mere grimace. In reality, it displays the mindset of Jesus as the soldiers laid His hands down against the wood to be torn through by the sharpened nails. As Jesus faced the moment of sacrifice, what was He thinking? He was surely focused on the great task He was completing. Perhaps three words—“resolution,” “determination,” and “discipline”—summarize the tenor of His thoughts at this most sacred of all moments.

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“You know my reproach and my shame and my dishonor; all my adversaries are before You. Reproach has broken my heart and I am so sick. And I looked for sympathy, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none. They also gave me gall for my food and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink” (Psalm 69:19–21).