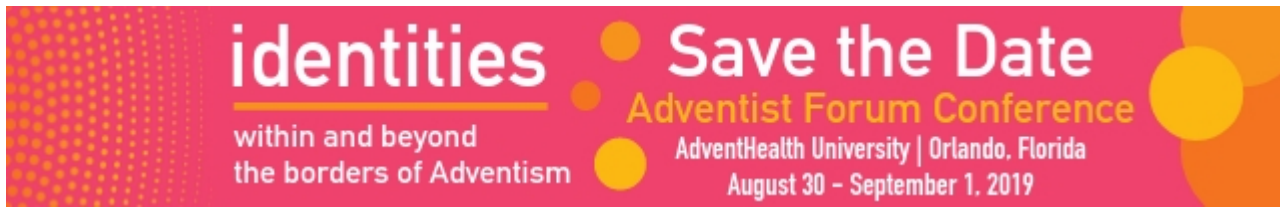


A VERY STRANGE WAY TO DIE



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Gethsemane became a suffocating spiritual torture chamber that was far worse than even Christ Himself had anticipated. We are told, “Christ was *amazed* with the horror of darkness that enclosed Him.” I find the use of the word “amazed” here truly astonishing. How bad was it when even the Savior Himself found it shocking?

I’m sure the Lord thought about the upcoming Gethsemane experience a thousand times during His ministry. With His extraordinary spiritual insights and off-the-charts IQ, we might reasonably expect that He would be able to approximate what this momentous final visit to His favorite garden retreat would be like.

Yet the darkness He experienced there was much deeper than even His worst-case scenario. One of the major reasons was the fact that what happened in Gethsemane had never occurred before in the history of the universe. For the first time, Christ experienced the wrath of God against sin and endured awful separation from His heavenly Father.

The Lord became strangely silent as He entered Gethsemane. The gospel of Mark tells us, “Horror and dismay came over him” (Mark 14:33 NEB). His inner spiritual and mental battle quickly revealed itself outwardly in debilitating physical effects.

Jesus groaned out loud and stumbled. Suddenly hobbled by unseen forces, He didn’t simply walk forward, He had to consciously lift each leg and place it down again as if each limb weighed a hundred pounds.

Breathing heavily, He swayed, then collapsed in a heap onto the cold ground. As separation from God took firm hold, He dug His fingers into the dark soil as if to keep Himself from being separated further. Eventually, the internal stress forced blood out through His pores, sending bright red rivulets streaking down His face and beard.

I see Him holding His throbbing head and rocking back and forth. I see Him, at times, clutching His legs and curling up into a ball. I see bloodshot, tear-filled eyes open wide in terror with foamy spittle forming at the edges of His mouth. I see Him throwing up.

The book of Hebrews says, "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, *with loud cries and tears*, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear" (Hebrews 5:7 RSV, emphasis supplied). The New International Commentary observes, "Gethsemane seems to offer the most telling illustration of these words." Ellen White adds, "Now His voice was heard on the still evening air, not in tones of triumph, *but full of human anguish*." The intensity of Jesus' cries in Gethsemane was akin to the shouts of someone trapped in a burning car or the desperate cries of a mother whose child has wandered onto a very busy highway.

Physically, mentally, and spiritually, Christ was pushed to the very edge of the precipice.

The gospel of Mark provides this startling quote, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death" (Matthew 26:37 NKJV). Here was grief so intense it could actually cause His bodily functions to collapse and shut down under the strain.

We are also told that, "The temptations of Satan *were almost overpowering*."

As the Lord wrestled with Satan that fateful night, He knew that the path forward called for Him to endure yet another Gethsemane, "Gethsemane #2," on the cross. The separation in the Garden would take place again, but this time it would occur under far worse circumstances (Romans 3:25-26).

The Savior understood that after the arrest, He would be put on trial repeatedly, condemned, brutally beaten several times, scourged until He was covered with deep lacerations, and then crucified, all BEFORE the second separation began (See Matthew 17, 20, 26; Mark 10; Luke 18). If He failed, the entire universe would be thrown into complete chaos and mankind would be lost.

Reality and the Devil's minions screamed at Christ in Gethsemane that it would be impossible for Him to go on and stay faithful to Heaven's plan. Jesus prayed for some alternative not because He feared the cross, but because He feared that His physical, mental, and emotional capacities would be unable to endure the test when stressed in such unprecedented ways.

At some point, as time ticked slowly by, it became clear that Jesus was, in fact, *dying*." If the angel had not come to revive Him, the Lord would have expired before the arrest.

After Gethsemane, the Savior should have been rushed by paramedics to a Trauma Center. Instead, out of infinite love for us, He somehow forced Himself to continue on. The courage and resolution Christ displayed that night are truly mind-boggling!

It would seem that the best plan would have been to have only one separation from God that took place on the cross. If Gethsemane had never happened, Christ would have been in far better shape to endure God's wrath on Calvary. Why was the separation in Gethsemane necessary? Didn't it create far too much of a risk?

I have come to believe that the separation in the Garden was required for Christ to make a fully informed decision about going to Calvary. Jesus had long before made up His mind to go to the cross. *What He had not done was to reaffirm that decision after experiencing what separation was actually like*. The separation in the Garden was necessary because there was no way to understand the nature of that final struggle on the cross without experiencing it first in a more controlled environment.

For example, it is one thing to decide to be an astronaut while visiting NASA. It is quite another to reaffirm that decision after being put through severe tests that expose you to the extraordinary stresses and strains that astronauts actually face.

Gethsemane not only allowed Christ to make an informed decision, it also allowed Him to adequately ready Himself mentally and spiritually for the darkness of Calvary, and, as a result, to be victorious.

Mercifully, between Gethsemane #1 and #2, Christ's sense of unity with His Father was temporarily restored.

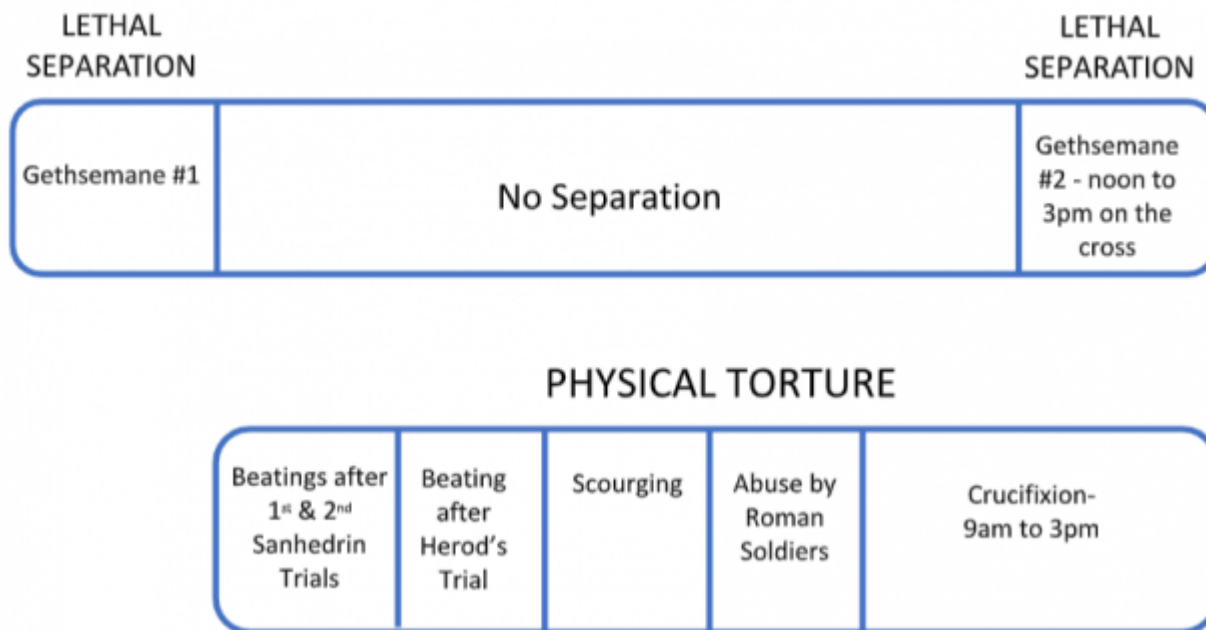
Moving ahead to Calvary and "Gethsemane #2," it is vital to understand that Christ died ON the cross, not FROM the cross. It was unheard of for anyone to die from crucifixion in six hours. It was the repetition of Gethsemane that took

His life. Crucifixion itself is so gory and gruesome it can easily grab our full attention, but we have to examine all that happened in order to understand.

Our salvation depends not only on the fact that Jesus died, but HOW He died. Physical death alone on a cross would not save us. He had to endure our penalty for sin, which is separation from God. We have to look beyond the nails to understand the connection between Gethsemane #1 and #2. It is these that were lethal. Everything else was part of the sequence of physical tortures, *including the cross*.

At one point on Calvary, the Savior was so oppressed by the Devil that He could not envision His own resurrection. The all too real possibility of being separated from God *forever* called forth the desperate cry, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?" That is the centerpiece of Golgotha (Matthew 27:46 NKJV). His death therefore cannot be equated with that of any Martyr who had the assurance of God's presence throughout.

The following graphic depicts the relationship between the various events that occurred from Gethsemane to Jesus' death on the cross:



Around 3 p.m. Friday afternoon, Christ's heart literally burst from the strain of His supreme battle with the forces of evil and the horror of suffering God's judgment on sin. For the first and only time, the future is brought into the present and we see what the ultimate penalty for sin will be like. No one else has lost their life from such a cause before or since. It was, indeed, a very strange, yet life-giving, way to die.

Notes & References:

For more on Jesus' sufferings and death, read Kim Allan Johnson's book *The Gift*.

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8. *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines*, (Washington, D.C., Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1988) 111
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Kim Johnson retired in 2014 as the Undertreasurer of the Florida Conference. He and his wife Ann live in Maitland, Florida. Kim has written a number of articles for SDA journals plus three books published by Pacific Press: [The Gift](#), [The Morning](#), and [The Team](#). He has also written three sets of small group lessons for churches that can be viewed at www.transformyourchurch.com. He is also the author of eight "Life Guides" on CREATION Health.

Image: Garden of Gethsemane. Credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#)