

35* James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, *came up to Jesus, saying, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You."36 And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?"37 They said to Him, "Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory."38* But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"39* They said to Him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized.40* "But to sit on My right or on My left, this is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

Ambition can be a dangerous thing.

God insists on telling us what our ambitions are to be. We ourselves are to know the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that is eternal life. We are to love him with all our hearts. We are to glorify God in everything we do. We are to be filled with all the fulness of God. We are to help bring in the kingdom of God so that the earth is filled with the knowledge of his glory. We are to live forever in a new heaven and earth. Give up your small ambitions! Live for him! Live with God! Live now! Jesus Christ came that you.

We are told that "James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him," (v.25). These two brothers were young men who had been following the Lord Christ for a couple of years. They'd seen his mightiest miracles and heard his profoundest teaching. When they heard someone say, "No one ever spoke like Jesus of Nazareth," they knew exactly what that speaker was getting at because they'd heard Jesus preach the Sermon on the Mount. They'd seen the dead raised. Winds and waves obeyed Christ. The greatest privileges anyone could have had since the fall of Adam had been theirs.

What do we know about them? When initially we are introduced to them in the first chapter of the gospel they are working at their boats and nets with hired servants. Here were a couple of guys used to giving orders to people. They left that to follow Jesus. It was not long before their mother, Salome, also became a follower. A devout woman she was soon a leading member in that group of women from Galilee taking care of the needs of the Lord Jesus. When Matthew tells us about Jesus' crucifixion he says that "the mother of Zebedee's sons" (Matt. 27:56) was with the band of women who

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were in turn sitting or standing in the awful darkness of the hill of Golgotha while
Jesus and the other two young men were hanging on their crosses there. We also know
that James and John both could be testy because when a Samaritan village wouldn't
tolerate Jesus' preaching they asked the Lord for authority to call down fire from
heaven and destroy the whole place , men, women, children. When these brothers later
came across a man delivering a person from devilish influences in the name of Jesus
they had told him to stop, explaining to the Lord, "He doesn't belong to our group."
These are the disciples whom Jesus had chosen and whom he loved, John in particular.

In the incident we are considering they have asked their mother to approach Jesus on
their behalf to make a special request. Matthew is the evangelist who recounts that
fact in chapter 20 and verse 20 of his gospel. He describes the details like this, that
Salome knelt down before Jesus when she spoke to him. Mark describes the incident to
us directly and says that it was really the brothers who were asking the question. So
you have to imagine the scene, the two brothers facing Jesus and there, kneeling on
the ground before them, looking up to Christ and beseeching him, their spokeswoman,
Salome.

This is what these three say to Jesus, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we
ask" (v.35). It is an extraordinary statement to make to God the Son. "We want YOU,
to do for US whatever we ask." In other words, "we are asking you, Jehovah Jesus, to
serve us, and to rubber stamp our request."

The Lord Jesus asks them, " What do you want me to do for you?" You see the
identical question Jesus asks Bartimaeus a few verses later (v.51), and the blind man
wants just one thing, that he might see. These two boys ask for glory and power. I
suppose we can imagine the Lord Christ standing before every one of us today and he
is asking us, "What do you want me to do for you? Why have you come here? What are
your looking for? What are your expectations in life from me?" These two brothers

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wanted to be next to the Lord Christ in the coming kingdom. These are their words,
"Let one of us sit at your right and the other on your left in your glory" (v.37). Now
you recollect the time when James and John asked this. It was just after the Savior has
told them how his own life was going to end, in suffering, crucifixion and resurrection.
When the brothers heard this on the road to Jerusalem didn't their whole lives seem to
come crashing down around them? Had there not been two earlier occasions when he'd
warned them that this was going to happen, and right after both those warnings, within
a matter of hours, either the apostles had opposed him or they had fallen apart arguing
as to who would be the greatest in the Kingdom. After hearing this account of the
agonies that were days away they were still jockeying for power, James and John
getting in their request before Peter or the others got in theirs. Once in each of the
previous chapters, 8 and 9, and now again here in chapter 10, a little power struggle
emerges amongst the twelve, the will of the apostles or the will of Jesus? Who is going
to be the greatest? We are seeing that even Jesus' own words were powerless to
change them before the resurrection, and before the Holy Spirit was poured upon
them. But there is the great apostolic admonition they would soon be written "Let
nothing be done through . . . vain glory" (Phils. 2:3).

Are we any different from James and John? We all want to go to heaven, the children
as much as anyone.

What can we say in defense of James and John? They had listened carefully to what
Jesus had said, but he had ended that talk of pain by speaking about being raised from
the dead, and that one word was enough for the brothers. They still believed in him.
They had been told by the Master that they were going to sit on thrones and they were
going to judge angels. They were ascending to Jerusalem, and the next ascent after
that would surely be up to heaven's throne! You say to these brothers the name of
Jesus and what immediately came into their minds? The throne of God in heaven. That
is the prime connection with Christ which their faith made. The connection was glory,
and kingship, and triumph over death. That is a wonderful faith! They had a theology of
victory; the triumph of their rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, over all his enemies, even death,

was what they believed in. Though he was found in fashion as a man, and had taken the form of a servant, nevertheless he'd made an extraordinary impact upon them. He had revolutionized their thinking about life and death and eternity. He was going to reign for ever and ever - this man walking on the road with them; the man pausing to drink, and eat, and rest, and go to the toilet. James and John showed heroic trust in him. Faith is the substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things not seen. The whole Jewish establishment hated Jesus and were plotting his death, but these two young men had confidence in their own Jesus. He was going to have illimitable sway over the kingdom of God, and they didn't want to be left out. They wanted to be where he was, as near as possible to him, one on each side. As Jesus was going to rise again it could only mean that the dawn of the promised messianic age was on the horizon. Soon the messianic banquet would begin, and they didn't want to be left out, indeed, as those belonging to the very inner core of his disciples, they desired places of honor in the world to come, on his right and left.

How does the loving Lord Jesus answer their prayer? "'You don't know what you are asking,' Jesus said. 'Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?'" (v.38).

So Jesus asks them whether they can be baptized with the baptism with which he is baptized, and they say, "Sure." The fundamental mistake was to not give weight to the other events which were to take place in Jerusalem. Wasn't the Lord emphasizing those events, the betrayal, the mockery, the spitting, the flogging, and the death of Jesus? They were dismissing the cross and focusing on the crown. All they had in their minds was his resurrection and their seats alongside him in glory, but it was solely because of the route that Jesus took that he could get to his journey's end.

So it was with James and John seeing in their minds' eyes the Lord Jesus sitting on the throne in glory and thinking, but ignoring the manner in which he had attained it.

So Jesus says, "You don't know what you are asking. Do you know the price of those

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two seats? The price is a 'cup' that has to be drunk, and a fearful baptism. That was Jesus' own way to the very best seat of all, by the cup he had to drink and the baptism with which he had to be baptized. What has he just said to them? Were they, " I want to tell you that I am going up to Jerusalem to be raised from the dead?" No. That's the conclusion, but, before that, what a cup of hatred he would have to drink. What a baptism of affliction he'd have to endure. He was going to Jerusalem to face judicial murder by the most terrible tortures. That was Jesus' route to his throne, it had to be via Golgotha. There was no other way and today there is still no other way for anyone to get to heaven. No man reaches the throne but by the humiliated, beaten-up, tortured, dying, dead Christ. So the Lord underlines this by way of two vivid metaphors:
The cup.

Jesus speaks about a cup and its contents must be drunk. The prophets were the first to refer to the cup. There could be a cup of happiness - "my cup overflows," says David in Psalm 23, but in Psalm 75 and verse 8 the psalmist warns, "in the hand of the Lord there is a cup" and he is thinking of the judgment which the Lord is preparing to extend to the wicked. Isaiah thinks of the disasters which have come upon Israel and this is how he describes them; they have drunk "at the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath" (Isa. 51:17). In Jeremiah the Lord asks this question, "If those who do not deserve to drink the cup must drink it, why should you go unpunished?" (Jer. 49:12). None was spared in the nation when the Babylonians took them into exile. The godly remnant, the women and the children and the old folk, all alike were driven to the slave market. They didn't deserve it but they'd all been made to drink that cup of wrath. Off into exile they'd gone; certainly corrupt and carnal people must drink it. "Rouse yourself, rouse yourself, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl of staggering" (Isa. 51:17). Here were sinners hopelessly and irretrievably under the wrath of God.

The Lord Jesus himself, the spotless Son of God, was faced with such an awesome cup. He who had never contracted sin of any kind, holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from

sinners, utterly lacking in sins of thought and mind and heart and soul and imagination, as pure and sinless as the holy God himself, he was given a cup of acid wickedness to drink - all our defilements were in it. Not a drop had fallen anywhere else for the angels to lick up. Not only all our iniquity was there but God's hatred of it - all that was in the cup before him. He looked at it with horror; God the Son taking right into himself that which was undiluted evil. Receiving that wickedness Jesus must face an advancing God armed with inconceivable vengeance towards all the ungodliness of man. "Is there another cup?" Jesus cried in Gethsemane. Was there any possibility, consistent with the holy glory of God, for that cup to pass from him? Was Golgotha the only way? Here was the man Christ Jesus, and in the Garden he's in terrible distress, because for the first time all our evil and the Father's measureless hatred of it is coming together within his mortal body. He falls to the ground and he prays that it may not be so. "Take the cup from me!" He rises and he falls again; "Can there be another cup which will yet save rebel sinners?" He rises and falls yet again! No Father comes to him with outstretched arms to comfort him and to offer Plan B. The Lofty One is silent. Heaven is barred with a thousand bolts. There is no other way than by that cup, and by Jesus - all by himself - drinking the contents of that cup. God's righteousness demanded it. Our sin required it. Satan feared it, and Christ took it. It took his sweat as drops of blood for him to take it. It took strong cryings and tears to drink it. It took sessions of prayer to take it, but take it he did. That was the cup. Damnation was in it, and he drank it lovingly for us!

2 The baptism.

The Lord Jesus might have just used one fearful metaphor when he talked to these brothers about the terrible cup that he would have to drink, but the Saviour brings in this additional metaphor to underline the horrors of Golgotha. He was about to be submerged, he says, deep into man's hatred, and mockery, and torment, and killing, and death. He was going to go down and down into that. More than that, he was to descend into the bottomless pit of the unrestrained wrath of God towards our sin; down and down into the lake of fire he was going to go, consigned by the divine anathema upon sin that he had freely taken. He had become - our sin! My sin! And

Jesus was dipped deep into it. He would feel himself drowning, carried down and down by the weight of that wickedness far from God. When he cried for rescue God didn't answer him. Every breath in that darkness which Jesus breathed was contaminated by sin; every thought he had was attacked by sin. Every sight he had was of the evil of sin. God consigned him to all that when Jesus was made sin, and God abandoned him there. That was Jesus' dipping. That was the route that he had to take to get to the throne. For the joy that was set before him he endured that - the fearful cross - but now he is seated at the right hand of God. By his cross he came to sit on his throne, and neither James nor John nor anyone else could have sat on their thrones without his cup and without his submersion.

Who could endure what God the Son endured? How fearful it will be to endure all the weight of the blame of your own sin forever and ever. Imagine all the accumulated guilt of every sin of your life, with all the accompanying regrets, summoned back and laid to your burning conscience world without end Amen! Isn't that hell? But think of this, what if I had to bear one other person's guilt as well as my own. Just one other person's answerability for a defiant rebel life, but I was being made to bear that also. Think of it! My own, but also all the years of that person's contempt of God and man. How crushing to bear my own sin, but now I am being thrust down carrying his also! But Jesus didn't bear the weight of one or two people, he bore the guilt of all his people. He knew and loved every one of them, and he took each one's sin. "He loved me, and gave himself for me," said Paul. That was the cup he drank. He experienced that baptism. So do you see his question to James and John, and his question to you? "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" (v.38). "Can you drink the cup?" asked Jesus. Yes, they could. "'We can,' they answered" (v. 39). These were two young unproven followers of Jesus. They'd hardly preached any sermons. They had known no suffering. They were untried and untested men. They'd never been put to the test. They had acted in Jesus' authority and through being with him they were full of self-confidence. Their response, "We can do it!" reminds me of

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the first time George Whitefield came to Wales, meeting Hywel Harris outside Cardiff
Castle. Harris' first words to Whitefield were very striking to the Gloucester man, "Do
you know your sins are forgiven?" Harris the seasoned

evangelist had been preaching in the open air to crowds for a couple of years, but this
was Whitefield's first attempt. The large crowd that had assembled to hear Harris
attracted pickpockets and showmen and players. One man began to mock Whitefield as
he spoke to them, standing at the front and mimicking his every gesture making the
onlookers roar with laughter. Whitefield found it deeply disconcerting; he couldn't
handle it, and soon he retired in confusion to the back of the platform. Then Harris
came to the front and announced his text, "The book of Revelation chapter 6 and the
last verse, verse 17, 'For the great day of his wrath is come, and who shall be able to
stand?'" The clown standing in the front shouted out, "I am able!" Harris cast his eye
upon him and said vehemently, "What, thou poor contemptible worm!" The man fell
backwards to the ground in fear at those words, as though he had been knocked down
with a weapon, and there he remained throughout Harris' mighty sermon.

Can you drink the cup? No you can't. Will it go away? No it won't. What's to be done
with the cup?

Just before they drove the nails through his hands and feet, the execution squad
offered him a cup to drink. It was a gesture of mercy. In the cup was a sedative drink;
there was some primitive but quite effective analgesic in that cup. It was offered to
him to deaden his pain. This soporific mixture was immediately identified and rejected
by Jesus. One little taste was enough for him to know he couldn't take it. He had to go
the whole way, from the throne of highest glory to the cross of deepest shame. He
must suffer to the utmost, and consciously, for those he individually and personally
loved. He must feel the full sting of death. No anaesthetic was possible. There was a
saving work to be done. He wouldn't have a dulled brain while he redeemed us from our
sin. He would pray for those tormenting him. He would commend his mother to his
friend. He would grant mercy to the dying thief. Loving his own who were in the world

The Christ of God did not waver. He knew that he had to endure the great baptism of judgment. So the soldiers came, carrying a sword in one hand, but in the other a soothing cup, but when God came to Golgotha he had a sword of judgment in one hand and another sword of judgment in the other. Christ was not doped on Golgotha. He would not be insensible or inattentive to what he was doing there. He would not allow a drowsy body to affect the great transaction of himself, body, soul and spirit as he became the Lamb of God and took away the sin of the world.