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Chapter Five

WHEN TIME BECAME AN ETERNITY

There are two 'schools' of thought about the best way of eating candy. They are mostly composed of children. There are those who plop a candy into the mouth and let the sweet juices slowly dissolve, bathing the taste buds gently and for quite a long time. Then there are those who find this delivery system quite unsatisfactory. They immediately start breaking up the candy with their molars and the enhanced flow of sweetness which results from the greatly increased surface area of the many smaller pieces proves far more rewarding.

For a while the volume of taste is marvelous and absorbs all their attention. They stare into space wholly occupied with delight, until suddenly they discover the candy is all gone; the last fragment has surreptitiously slipped down the throat with almost indecent haste. All too soon there is nothing left: nothing, that is, except the resolve next time to suck it more slowly! This resolve is strengthened as the supply of candies runs out and only becomes firm when they are all gone.

There are many of the former school, mostly girls I suspect: but there are perhaps more of the latter, mostly boys I think. I always resolved to make the candy last and always failed to keep that resolve and still do, sixty years later.

Herein is an analogy. Enjoyment may be mild and long, or deep and intense: as it is with pleasure, so it is with *pain*. Not infrequently we have a choice, even in the matter of pain. We can stay away from "the house" so that mother will not at once send us to that highly paid torturer, the dentist. We endure the gnawing ache until it either becomes unbearable and cannot be concealed, or until for some reason it eases up and finally stops altogether — for a few days at least. Alternatively, we can go home like a martyr about to be thrown to the lions, and for a few agonizing moments we can allow some eager dentist to probe relentlessly. He hits it with a sledgehammer, all the while supposing he is merely tapping it in order to identify the offending tooth which must be obvious to anyone. And then he asks, "Does it hurt?" while he can see we are suffering agonies even from his mere looking at it. Then all

of a sudden he presents the offending tooth before our eyes, and we are not even quite sure when he took it out!

So there we have a principle: the alternative of long and mild, or short and awful. This is a principle of very wide application. We meet it in our handling of criminals, for instance. We can chop off a man's head (France still does, I believe), or we can imprison him for twenty years. We assume, of course, that twenty years of imprisonment is always to be preferred by the prisoner, but we do so only because neither he nor we can know what a long slow painful death those twenty years are likely to be unless, of course, there is hope of reprieve for "good" behaviour.

Having one's head cut off or being shot by a firing squad is at least quick, and perhaps hanging is not much more protracted; but given the choice, men opt for the long and the slow rather than the quick and the short. At least, most men do. A few very brave or perhaps strangely misguided (?) individuals prefer the short and the quick. But most people facing such an alternative naturally choose the one that allows some small chance of remission. Yet even where there is no possibility of a reprieve, men still often choose the long and the slow, hoping against hope.

In our society, we have now confused the issue by supposing life to be better than death, no matter what the conditions are. Even in a concentration camp only a very small percentage of people deliberately tried to commit suicide. It is when all hope is gone, all hope of a foreseeable end and release, that death seems preferable. If, for some reason, the circumstances are such that death cannot be embraced as a means of release from the agony of life so that there is no hope of escape even by this means, then the penalty becomes utterly unbearable.

As we shall see, this was the position that the Lord Jesus Christ was in when He became a sin-offering for us. Only when the suffering entailed in that sacrifice was paid in full could He then embrace death and find release. And as we shall also see, those three hours of darkness must have been an eternity while they were endured.

Fitting the punishment to the crime

Now the point of this preamble, and indeed of all that has been reviewed in the previous chapters, is that there is some kind of equation in the scales of justice between punishment which is *extensive* and punishment which is *intensive*; between punishment that, judged by our relative standards, is long-lasting but sufferable, and punishment which is brief but insufferable.

Moreover, the nature or character of the sufferer has a bearing on the matter. Consider the penalty of total isolation, for example. Total isolation would do little for a cow — though being a herding animal, it would probably get lonely now and then. But total isolation for a human being has proved to be so severe a punishment that it can amount to torture if it is sustained; and the nations are near to agreeing (at

least, professedly) that it should be outlawed entirely. Such international abhorrence will probably not put an end to it, but at least the confession of abhorrence is itself proof enough of the severity of isolation as a punishment.

So man suffers more than a cow in certain situations. But it is also true that some men suffer more than other men. In the same situation, punishment that seems comparatively innocuous for one may devastate another. Thus the principle of sentencing to so many years in prison, or to so many lashes, or to a fine of so many dollars, on a sliding scale fixed for each offense by consent of society, is essentially unjust because it does not take into consideration the "sensitivity" of the prisoner. Such sensitivity *is*, of course, taken into account sometimes, though in times of public danger these refinements are abandoned. Yet that it should be done at all demonstrates another important point: namely, that *the capacity of the prisoner to suffer* predetermines to a large extent the severity of the penalty from *his* point of view.

A hardened criminal shrugs off a term of two or three years as merely an inconvenience. These two or three years can even be to his advantage. After all, he goes to 'school' among experts in his craft and can improve his technique while being supplied with free board and lodging and some entertainment. The naive individual who, though admittedly for selfish reasons, has allowed himself to be trapped into some skullduggery and to get caught, suffers far more from the same sentence for a similar crime. He may not be a criminal at all, only a spineless human being, perhaps with a low IQ. *The fitting of the punishment to the crime depends not merely on the nature of the **CRIME**, but also on the nature of the **criminal**.*

What, then, of the suffering imposed unjustly upon a Man who is morally perfect, who is completely innocent, whose imaginative powers are developed to the highest degree possible for a human being, who is without spot or blemish in his character, and who has a capacity for suffering for others infinitely beyond that of the rest of men? Because of our selfishness most of us have too little capacity for this kind of suffering, but the capacity of the Lord Jesus for suffering with and for others was infinite. Every one who touched Him, expectantly, drew strength out of Him, and He was always consciously drained by this kind of human contact (Luke 8:46⁶⁸). He wept at the grave of Lazarus not because Lazarus was dead, for He knew that within a few moments He would be raising Lazarus to life again⁶⁹. He wept because He shared so totally the grief of Martha and Mary, and was overwhelmed in his spirit by the sadness of the fact of death in the midst of life. Because He was God-made-

⁶⁸ "Jesus said, Who touched me? When all denied, Peter said, Master, the multitude throng you and press you, and do you ask, Who touched me? Jesus said, Somebody has touched me, for I perceive that virtue has gone out of me." Luke 8:45-46.

⁶⁹ For the account of the raising of Lazarus, see John 1:1-44.

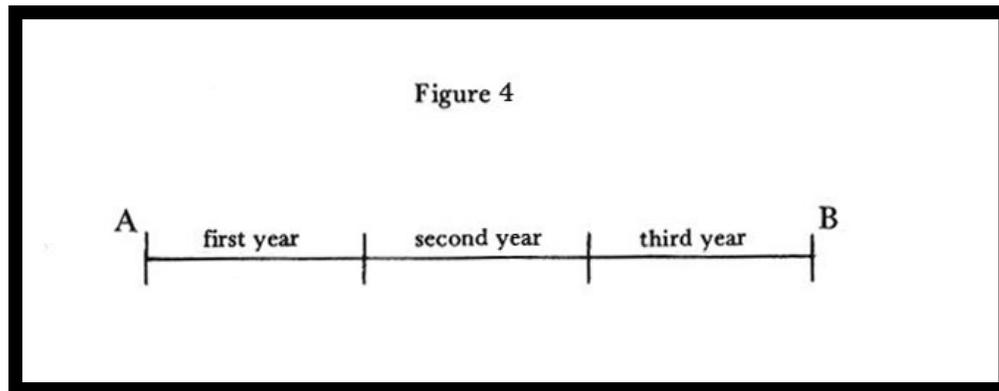
Man, this capacity for sharing human suffering must have been inexhaustible: yet it was deeply, deeply felt nevertheless. On the *intensive* side of the scales, there was no imaginable limit to what the penalty of our sins could impose upon Him in agony of soul when He accepted responsibility for them in our place.

How long, then, must *He* actually suffer in his own body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24⁷⁰) in order to atone for our sins? Clearly, the answer lies in the extent of his capacity. And that capacity was infinite. The *depth* dimension in this equation reaches down so far in the infinitude of his capacity that the length dimension, the length of time He must suffer when measured in hours, almost ceases to have any consequence. It is necessary to say *almost* for reasons which will become apparent in due time.

It would seem, in fact, that the Lord Jesus could have been made a curse for us for only one *second* of time by our clocks and still have paid in full the moral consequences of our sins, perfectly satisfying the demands of the law — because of the intensity of that one second of suffering. The unfathomable depth of his agony of soul would fully have compensated for the seeming shortness of his sentence.

Punishment: extensive vs. intensive

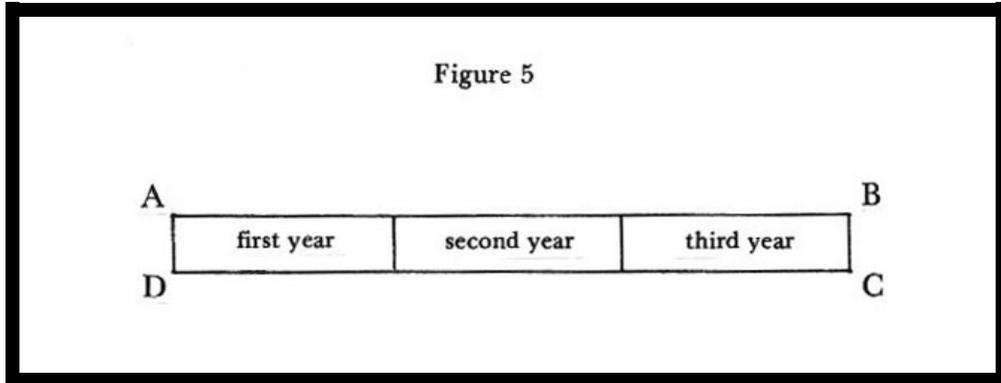
Now a diagram seems inappropriate in such a context. Yet the significance of this tremendous truth can be illuminated in some ways by such a means. Let us assume, for instance, that the length of a man's three year sentence is represented by a line (AB, Fig. 4) thus:



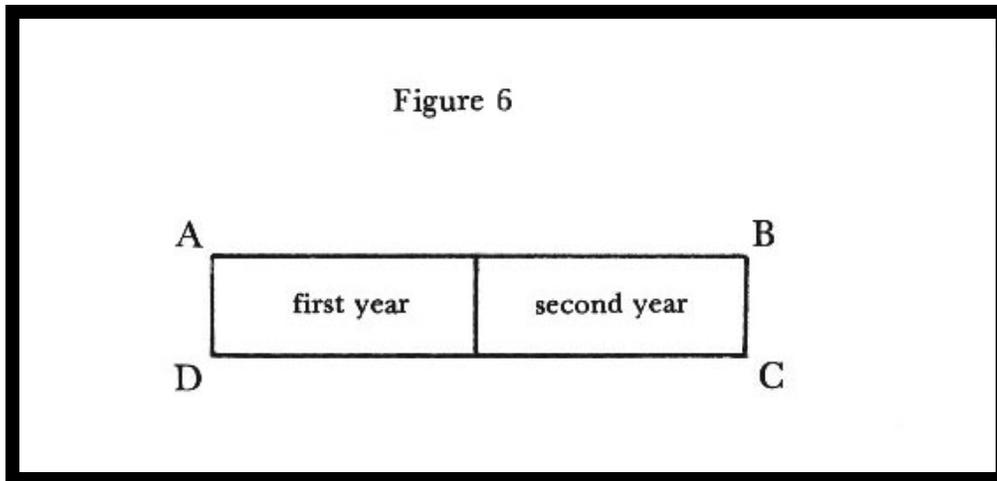
If the terms of his imprisonment are only mild, the depth of his suffering throughout this period could be represented by a *shallow* rectangle (Fig. 5) in which the dimension AB is still the length of his sentence, but the depth BC is the measure of the intensity of his suffering during that period. Thus the area ABCD stands,

⁷⁰ "...who his own self bore our sins in his own body on the tree." 1 Peter 2:24.

visually, for the total effective weight of his sentence, for the real measure of his punishment.



Let us take the case of another individual who has committed the same offense and ought therefore to have the same penalty imposed upon him. However in this case, either because he is a first offender or because of old age or frail health, let us suppose that the judge, recognizing the greater sensitivity of the offender, shortens his sentence to two years instead of three. We now have a rectangle whose long dimension (AB in Fig. 6) is only two years but whose vertical dimension (BC) is now half again as deep as that of the vertical dimension in Fig. 5.



The area of this rectangle turns out to be the same as the area of Fig. 4: in fact both sentences are the same in their weighting, though the second individual has received a significantly shorter sentence in terms of years. The sensitivity of the victim, the capacity of the victim to suffer, has been taken into account by shortening the extensity of the sentence. The total penalty is unaffected.

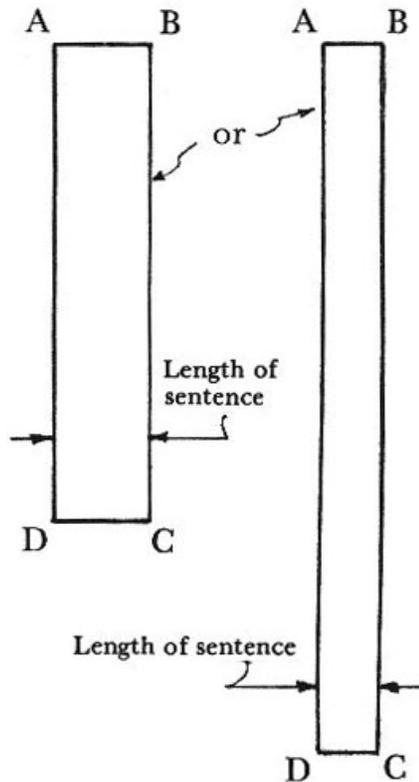


Figure 7

end the AB or horizontal or *time* factor line could be almost negligible but the depth factor BC then becomes all important. Capital punishment represents this kind of situation: the intensity of the punishment far outweighs its extensity. Carried to its logical conclusion, if the intensity of the suffering is infinite, the line AB representing the time factor can be reduced to a *point* — i.e., theoretically, to no *time* at all. There is nothing absurd about this, for as we have seen, there *is* a reality which is conceivably time-less.

How far could this shortening go? How short can the line AB become while strictly forming an equivalent penalty if compensated by increased depth? Obviously the two rectangles can simply be up-ended without in any way altering their total weighting. Thus the line AB becomes greatly abbreviated and the intensity, BC, is greatly extended (Fig. 7), and if the proportions of these two lines are preserved, the total area must remain constant, and the penalty itself as imposed by the judge remains unchanged.

We may go one step further yet. If this tall thin column were to be narrowed still further and deepened accordingly, the principle would remain intact, for the rectangle could be adjusted in depth to maintain a constant total area. In the

He endured the cross

Thus, had the Lord Jesus Christ been suffering only as God, the torment of the penalty would have been infinite in its depth and the time element would have been reduced to zero, since time would have been eclipsed by eternity. But because the Son was not only God but also Man, and because He was placed in this position as a suffering *human* being, He could not altogether escape from the bondage of our time frame. He had to remain conscious *within* time and, in some sense, *of* time. In this sense He *endured* the cross (Hebrews 12:2⁷¹). How long, then, did He endure?

Throughout history man has experienced the terror of physical torture; and from what has been recorded of it in recent years we may learn some things about that other kind of torture with which we are particularly concerned in the present instance, the torture of the soul. From personal experience Viktor Frankl had a profound insight into the nature of suffering endured when there is no hope of an end. Intense suffering of this kind concentrates attention entirely upon the present moment. There is no looking to the future in hope. Hope is a powerful sustainer when an end is foreseen but, as Frankl observes, a man who cannot see the end ceases to live for the future and therefore exists altogether without hope.⁷² This was precisely the position in which the Lord was confined when He became a sin-offering for us. For in the absolute condemnation which this involved, He suffered as One from whom the termination of his sentence was completely hidden. He experienced total forsaking not merely by man but by his heavenly Father whom He had never disobeyed throughout his whole earthly life —nor even displeased.⁷³

⁷¹ "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who instead of the joy set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." Hebrews 12:2.

⁷² Frankl, Viktor, *Man's Search for Meaning*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1963, pp.112, 115, 171.

⁷³ Three times God declared He was pleased with his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ: in his youth, "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man" (Luke 2:52); at the beginning of his ministry, "And Jesus, when he was baptized, went straightway up out of the water; and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending on him like a dove and lighting upon him, and lo, a voice from heaven saying, 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased' (Matthew 3:16); and near the end of his ministry on the Mount of Transfiguration, ". . . a bright cloud overshadowed them and a voice came out of the cloud which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him" (Matthew 17:5).

Because He had not the slightest inkling of a foreseeable end, His suffering became, in fact, an eternal punishment.⁷⁴

Yet while He thus suffered eternally, the soldiers who guarded Him continued to live in time, no doubt eagerly awaiting the end of the day when they would go off duty. Frankl observes that the prisoners and the guards in the concentration camps lived in entirely different worlds of time. The prisoners often experienced such agony of soul that time ceased to have any significance to them whatever, while their guards continued to live entirely by the clock.

The man whose suffering is bearable can keep his eye on the passage of time and, if he knows when the end is to be, he can gain some comfort by saying to himself, "I'm halfway through" or "It's nearly over." The existence of hope and the sense of the passage of time run together: and when intensity of suffering is so great that the sense of time is lost, hope is lost. Pain is locked into the immediate present and any comfort in the thought of an end is eclipsed. Suffering takes on an experienced quality of endlessness. Extreme agony of soul pins down all consciousness to a point in time, kaleidoscoping both future and past and effectively converting the momentary *now* into endlessness.

Because we conceive of punishment as being much or little in terms of duration, we interpret the Scriptures which tell us that it will be *eternal* (which is a more correct translation of the original Greek) to mean *everlasting* (which is probably a far less correct translation of the original Greek). It could be that the biblical meaning of eternal has no direct reference to *duration* at all. It could conceivably be a qualitative term rather than a quantitative one, carrying the idea of intensity or depth rather than extensity of length — as it almost certainly does in reference to eternal life. Eternal life is another kind of life, a quality of life, a life of depth, a life more abundant (John 10:10⁷⁵). The question of duration is not denied: it is simply not at issue. Perhaps eternal punishment really means punishment whose intensity cannot actually be conveyed to our time-bound minds except by saying that it will be experienced with an intensity that will make it effectively interminable while it lasts.

In some unfathomable way, the Lord Jesus Christ as our substitute must have experienced *eternal* punishment. One has to ask then, How does this quality of eternity relate to the three hours of darkness on the cross? Was this experienced by the Lord as three hours, or was this just the time period accounted for by the guards on duty who had some kind of candle or water clock to keep a record of their time?

⁷⁴ On this see the author's *Seed of the Woman*, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, Doorway Publications, 1980, chap. 31, p.396.

⁷⁵ "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." John 10:10.

Did the supernatural darkness of those hours actually signify (among other things) that the one agency of God's economy in the heavens by which our time is regulated had been "stopped" for that interval? I do not mean to suggest that it was literally stopped in its passage but effectively stopped because its movement could no longer be *seen*. The Lord Himself was thus left on the cross without a clock.

Did time then stop for Him? Did He experience such a sense of timelessness that what was already endured did not contribute in any way towards the reduction of what remained yet to be endured in order to fulfill the total penalty which must be paid? Was this a form of *endless* punishment with no foreseeable termination, though when it was over it had occupied only three hours by our clocks? Do we not in fact have here a case of truly *eternal* torment which had, nevertheless, been fulfilled in a period of three hours?⁷⁶

He descended into hell

Can we have even the remotest conception of what it would mean for One who was morally perfect, pure in spirit in the absolute sense, without the slightest taint of guilt in any form and altogether sinless, to be suddenly held responsible for the appalling record of crime and injustice and brutality and hatred and insane cruelty that marks the frightful record of human history from the murder of Abel to the extermination centres and labour camps of today? What would it mean to be so accounted guilty that the Father Himself turned away from his beloved Son as One who now, as the sin-bearer, was abhorrent in his sight?

⁷⁶ Some time after completing this chapter, I acquired a copy of *A Body of Divinity* by John Gill (1697 - 1771) and came across, to my delight, the following (I have taken the liberty of re-phrasing his sentences slightly in order to make his meaning clearer — but reference to the original will show that I have not betrayed his meaning in any way)

"When He (Christ) was made sin and a curse. . . it was tantamount to an eternal death, or the suffering of the wicked in hell. For though the two kinds of suffering differ as to circumstances of time and place, the persons being different, the one finite and the other infinite, yet as to the essence of these sufferings, they were the same. Eternal death consists in two things: punishment in the form of deprivation, and punishment in the form of actual affliction. The former lies in an eternal separation from God, or a deprivation of his presence forever: and the latter lies in an everlasting affliction in the everlasting fire of God's wrath.

"Now Christ endured what was answerable to both of these. . . . Eternity is not the essence of punishment but it is consequent of the fact that the sufferer cannot all at once bear the whole — being finite as sinful man is finite. And as it cannot be borne all at once it is continued *ad infinitum*. But Christ, being an infinite Person, was able to bear the whole at once and the infinity of his Person abundantly compensates for the eternity of the punishment." [A *Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, vol. 1, Grand Rapids, Baker reprint, 1978, p.574.]

In these three hours the Lord Jesus was made a sin-offering; that is to say He became effectively the doer of this frightfulness not only in the sight of man, but in the sight of God and the whole host of heaven. He who was Himself blameless assumed full responsibility and was to blame. He who was pure was made vile. He who was holy was made unholy with the leprosy of our sin. He who was the very expression of love became as hateful as sin itself. He who was without spot was infected with the cancer of our wickedness. He who knew no sin was actually made sinful by identification.⁷⁷

He descended into hell, into the utter solitude that on the Day of Atonement was symbolized by the sending forth of the scapegoat into an uninhabited desert of evil marked by the absence of all other relationships. It was not for a few hours only that this terrible penalty was imposed upon Him but — in his experience — *forever*: He could not know in his darkness how long it would take to pay the price. Nor could He have any anticipation of when the price had been paid in full until, at last, He became aware once more of his Father's presence. He could not anticipate the end, and with no anticipation of the end, his suffering became infinite. He could not cry out, "Father, forgive Me!" He could not cry, "God, have mercy upon Me!" On what grounds could mercy be extended to HIM? On no ground, except the completion of his sacrifice, could any mercy be extended to *anyone*. On what basis could *his* reprieve be granted — except all others forfeit the forgiveness He had come to guarantee *them*? For on the fullness of his sacrifice depended all other forgiveness.

He could atone for the sins of others and pray the Father to forgive *them* (Luke 23:34⁷⁸) but there was no way in which He could save Himself if He was to save us. They were right who mocked Him thus (Matthew 27:42⁷⁹). In Gethsemane He had said to his disciples, "Could ye not watch with Me for one

⁷⁷ Scripture seems to go out of its way to make it very clear that Jesus was indeed sinless. Paul, the intellectual, declared "[God] has made him [Jesus] to be sin for us, who *knew* no sin. . . ." (2 Corinthians 5:2); Peter, the activist, said "who *did* no sin" (2 Peter 2:22); and John, the spiritual one, observed that "in him *is* no sin" (1 John 3:5) [my emphasis].

⁷⁸ "Then Jesus said, Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." Luke 23:34.

⁷⁹ "He saved others: himself he cannot save. If he be the king of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him." Matthew 27:42.

hour?" (Matthew 26:40).⁸⁰ Here He could only say, "My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46⁸¹).

Of course, He had known this had to be. But anticipating that a fearful agony is to be borne, even though He knew in prospect that it must come to an end since He had told his disciples He would rise again, such knowledge did not serve to ameliorate it when the intensity of that agony fell upon Him. I cannot believe He had a *fear* of it as He foresaw what was to happen, but He must have had an awful *horror* of what it would entail. His prayer in Gethsemane bears this out. And when the blow fell who can possibly know what He endured in that eternity in order that our eternity of punishment might be commuted to total blamelessness because He for an eternity had borne the penalty for us.

Why the three hours

Because He was *God*, his capacity for suffering was infinite. And we must suppose that with this capacity there need have been no time dimension at all. But because He was *Man*, the time factor could not altogether be dispensed with, and by our clocks that moment of time was stretched into hours. Justice must not only be done: it must also be *seen* to be done. Had the Lord fulfilled the requirements of the penalty in such depth as to make its duration in time a matter only of moments, we should never have been fully persuaded that He really did suffer for us sufficiently to write "paid in full" across our debt. His triumphant cry, "It is finished!" (*tetelestai*, John 19:30⁸²) is now known to have been, in Greek and Roman times, what was officially stamped as an acknowledgment of receipt on all bills: "PAID IN FULL!"⁸³

In point of fact, the hours of which we have a record bear virtually no relevance to his sacrifice as a sin-offering for our sins. It seems clear to me that all that was accomplished on the cross could indeed have been fulfilled in a moment of our time. Did not Satan show Him all the glories of the world's kingdoms in "a

⁸⁰ "He came to his disciples and, finding them asleep, said to Peter, What, could you not watch with me one hour?" Matthew 26:40.

⁸¹ "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Matthew 27:46.

⁸² "When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost." John 19:30.

⁸³ See J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1972, p. 630 under "τελεω" (teleo).

moment of time" (Luke 4:5⁸⁴)? Then, having fulfilled his role as the Lamb of God, He might in a few moments or even instantly have dismissed his life and terminated the whole ordeal in triumph. But to us, constituted as we are, there would have been an apparent falling short of justice.

Perhaps it was extended chiefly to satisfy our sense of justice; but it was also because He suffered as *Man* that the time element had to be introduced as it was — and set on record as it has been. The three hours of our clocks were an eternity to his soul. It was an eclipse of time, timeless-ness within time.

Did the Father also suffer?

There remains one final thought. Did the Father also suffer for an eternity in the loss of his Son? It seems that this could have been so. The Father could foresee the end of his Son's exile and rejoice in anticipation of his return to his Bosom, even as the Son must have done so in prospect and given his disciples assurance accordingly. But I think that something of the agony of soul which the Lord Jesus suffered as our sin-offering must have been shared in some way by the Father in heaven, when his Son ceased to be an object of joy and became a thing abhorrent and contaminated with our sin. The sacrifice which the Father made was thus as great an exhibition of love for mankind as the sacrifice which the Son made.

It is not merely that the Son lost the Father: the Father lost the Son. The sacrifice of separation must have been felt both ways. Could it be truly said otherwise that God *gave* his Son as a proof of his love?

For God not only "gave his only begotten Son" (John 3:16⁸⁵) but He "laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6⁸⁶) so that the Lord was literally "smitten of God" (Isaiah 53:4⁸⁷). In this sense the Son was punished by the Father, and that the

⁸⁴ "And the devil, taking him up into an high mountain, showed unto him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time." Luke 4:5.

⁸⁵ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." John 3:16.

⁸⁶ "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." Isaiah 53:6.

⁸⁷ "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted." Isaiah 53:4.

Father should do this to his beloved Son — sparing nothing of the punishment which sin deserved — must surely have been an agony for Himself also?⁸⁸

Thus was the love of God — Father and Son alike — made manifest towards us. "Herein is love; not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

But how impossible it is to write worthily of such an event as this. . . .

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⁸⁸ When God "gave" his only-begotten Son He did so in the most literal sense. He *lost* Him, in those hours of darkness — as He had lost his first created son in the Garden of Eden after the Fall, when He called out to Adam "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9) The rupture between the Father and the Son was a rupture of an eternal fellowship. It was, of necessity, an eternal rupture, a rupture for eternity — while it lasted. It was *experienced* as unending in some real sense by both parties. For man, who lives in time, all parting has some hope of an end. For God who 'inhabits eternity' (Isaiah 57:15*) the situation was awesomely different.

* "For thus says the high and lofty One that inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones." Isaiah 57:15.