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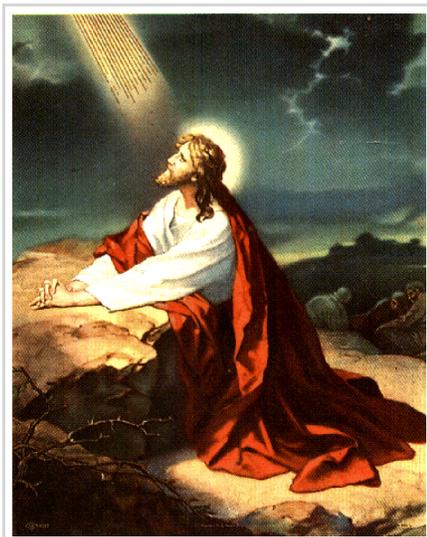
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# drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 03, 2007

## Bible Brain Busters: Gethsemane Prayer



I recently had an interesting conversation about Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, "Not my will but thine be done." What made the conversation so interesting was the lead question: *to whom* was Jesus' praying in the garden? God the Father? God, a.k.a. the entire trinity? Himself, a.k.a. God the Son? Our conversation marked this as a genuine **Bible Brain Buster**: a biblical text that becomes puzzling in light of central Christian affirmations. In this case, how do we think through the prayer life of Jesus

in light of his divine nature?

Since the question itself is just as interesting as the answer, let me offer a **few possible responses** before reflecting directly upon the significance of the question:

### Option 1: The man Jesus is praying to God.

This first option is not really a solution but a denial of the problem. The story of the Garden of Gethsemane is simply a story of a human being crying out to God. Jesus may have been a perfect human being, but he was a human being nonetheless, and so prays to God like any other human being. Within this option a number of approaches to the divinity of Jesus could be taken: God the Son emptied himself of all divine attributes at the incarnation; Jesus *became* divine after the resurrection; Jesus' divinity refers to his perfect reliance on God's Spirit; etc. The strength of this option is its emphasis on Jesus' true humanity and its straightforwardness with regard to this particular text. The weakness of this option is the

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corners it has to cut with regard to a robust affirmation of the divinity of Jesus.

### Option 2: God the Son is praying to God the Father.

This second option grounds the historical Gethsemane prayer in the eternal life of the triune God. In the story of the Garden prayer we catch a glimpse into the inner life of the trinity: the Father sends, the Son is sent; the Father wills, the Son submits his will. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity tells us that God is not a single willing person but three persons, each with its own "personality" and therefore "will." So God has these sorts of internal conversations all the time; the Gethsemane prayer is simply a significant instance of this social life of God. The strength of this option is its emphasis on Jesus' true divinity and its decision to locate this problem within the dynamics of the trinity. The weakness of this option is the new problem this solution creates: is a God with three wills really the *one* God of Israel? To put it bluntly, this multiple-personality theory runs the risk of tritheism.

### Option 3: The Incarnate Son as the man Jesus is praying to God the Father.

This third option tries to bring the doctrine of the trinity and the doctrine of incarnation in close connection with one another in order to make sense of the prayer life of Jesus. In the story of Gethsemane we see the temporal fulfillment of God's eternal purpose to become incarnate. The one God with one will chooses to send himself into human history by taking on the human flesh of Jesus. God's eternal constitution as one being in three persons has this incarnational end in view. So the eternal Son (who has no will other than the Father's) wills to take to himself a complete human nature. This complete human nature includes a fully human will. Therefore, God the Son has two wills: the common divine will shared by all three persons of the Godhead and the human will of Jesus. So, in the garden, the fully divine Son incarnate as a human being is praying to God the Father in the power of their Holy Spirit. The incarnate Son submits his human will to the will of God the Father. The strength of this option is the close connection drawn between the trinity and the incarnation as well as its use of the "two wills" doctrine affirmed at the Sixth Ecumenical Council (Constantinople 680-81). The weakness of this option is the possible implication that God must become incarnate in order to be triune. It is also a terribly complicated answer, which may be perceived as a strength depending on one's temperament.

Well, there's some possible responses to the question of "To whom was Jesus praying?" Now I find this question and the debate between these answers fascinating. I would be happy to discuss the particulars

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of the matter. But even more interesting to me is that one would even ask this question in the first place. The only person who would treat the Garden of Gethsemane story as a puzzle is someone who assumes a high Christology. **You can tell a lot about a person's theological commitments by observing which biblical texts create interpretive difficulties for them.** In other words, one's admitted Bible Brain Busters reveal one's deepest beliefs. Even if these beliefs are held implicitly or unreflectively, they exert pressure on us at these critical points. So identifying one's own (and others') Bible Brain Busters helps us to explicitly investigate our beliefs and how they relate to specific Scriptural passages. Hence, they are a worthy entry point for theological inquiry.

### Any thoughts?

So, what are your Bible Brain Busters?

Which texts throw you for a loop?

Can you identify what basic beliefs make these texts particularly difficult?

Do you have any thoughts on the example of Jesus' Gethsemane Prayer?

*NOTE:* If I get a good list of Bible Brain Busters going, I may do a series on them at some point.

Labels: [Bible Brain Busters](#), [Christology](#), [Practice of Theology](#), [Trinity](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 2:36 PM

[11 comments](#)

### 11 Comments:

At [9:34 PM, January 03, 2007](#), Anonymous said...

John,

Thanks a lot for messing up my brain (again)! Great thoughts. I'm reading Giles' \*The Trinity and Subordinationism,\* & I was just starting to think I was understanding things. :)

Good point too about how one's "Bible Brain Busters" tell a lot about their views/thoughts/theology.

I like to think I contributed to the sharpness of your brain by all those games of "Ticket to Ride" that I won over Christmas break. :)

Christy

At [10:11 AM, January 05, 2007](#), [The AJ Thomas](#) said...

It would seem to me the answer to the question "who was Jesus praying to?" is simple - the Father. The text actually says "Abba Father". So the question is not who is being prayed to but who is

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praying. That being said I have no good answer to this question.

Theologically speaking was it the man Jesus, the incarnate Son, or "both" who suffered on the cross? That would seem to give us some insight.

If the three persons of the trinity don't have their own wills then what marks them out as persons?

Is it possible that Jesus was in complete alignment with God's ultimate will - the salvation of the world - but had reservations about this particular method?

At [10:24 AM, January 05, 2007](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Christy - I'm glad you are reading Giles. I'd like to hear what you think.

The AJ - thank you for clarifying the question to include the subject and not only the object of Jesus' prayer. I would say the object is still a relevant question simply because "Father" does not only univocally apply to the first person of the trinity but may sometimes be used to refer to God's essence.

As for the matter of wills, ascribing three wills and thus three distinct centers of consciousness to the three persons of the trinity is the move behind option #2, which you are more than free to choose. I will simply note that this is not what the early fathers or the medievals meant by "person". For them, will is an attribute of the divine essence, not the divine persons. The persons are substitutive relations, not centers of consciousness with autonomous wills in the modern sense. This does not rule out such a revision in the doctrine of the trinity, but it must be acknowledged as a revision. We hear "three persons" and immediately fill in the meaning of "person" in the equation. What "person" means in this special case requires careful thought.

At [10:46 AM, January 05, 2007](#), [David Drury](#) said...

So wonderful to have you start this series. Because I'm a local church pastor these types of questions are the kinds of theological inquiry that is most practical to my everyday life. Even the most blue-collar Christian has a few Bible Brain Busters a month (if they're honest with themselves--and I find more and more Christians are becoming so).

It's also nice to see a fun little conversation at Big Boy become the seed for one of your theological treatises... and as then, your citation of the sixth ecumenical council [a.k.a. the 3rd Constantinople Council] and the "two wills doctrine" was what

fascinated me most.

More on that council is found at the below links for those out there like me who tend to learn these things from secondary sources:

<http://www.goarch.org/en/ourfaith/articles/article8069.asp>  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third\\_Council\\_of\\_Constantinople](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third_Council_of_Constantinople)  
<http://www.legionofmarytidewater.com/faith/ECUM06.HTM>  
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04310a.htm>

I'll be back at a later date with suggestions for future "Bible brain buster" scriptures/topics, but for now I don't want to Pirate your Blog since I don't have one of my own and so I'm prone to do so.

: -)

At [3:13 PM, January 05, 2007](#), [Harold Harmon](#) said...

John,

I guess one of the aspects of Jesus' prayer that has bothered me is the fact that He was "deeply distressed and troubled." What bothers me is what exactly is He distressed and troubled about? I realize there is the pain and suffering of the cross, but He is God (and man I get that). And He knew that He would rise again. Is it the separation from the Father that is so utterly painful that no matter who He is, this is something that He could not possibly bear? And is this the ultimate lesson for us - not to be separated from the Father.

Harold

At [10:46 PM, January 05, 2007](#), [The AJ Thomas](#) said...

John - thanks, for the record I have no idea what to think and was honestly asking about the will = person thing. Back to that question - what does it mean to be a "person" within the Trinity.

Harold - From what I little I have read it seems that crucifixion was considered by many people in Jesus' time to be a negative experience? I think he was upset about the journey more than the destination so to speak.

At [11:53 AM, January 06, 2007](#), [Stacy](#) said...

*This post has been removed by the author.*

At [10:34 PM, January 06, 2007](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

Great post, if a little troubling. I think I'll go have some ice cream and everything will be right as rain...

At [8:48 AM, January 09, 2007](#), [Harold Harmon](#) said...

In thinking over my previous comment I can see how John's initial question fits. The question that I struggled with was - Since Jesus is fully God and fully man, then what was he "deeply distressed and troubled" about?

When I re-look at my question in the context of John's three options I can see how Jesus would be distressed no matter which "option" we take. Jesus as man would be distressed over the experience of the crucifixion. God the Son would be distressed over the experience of the separation from the Father.

It seems that the underlying message of the penalty of sin being death - but not just physical death - but the total separation from the Father is what distressed Jesus.

At [11:43 AM, January 11, 2007](#), [Jeffrey Crawford](#) said...

It seems to me that Jesus knew full well the power of prayer. It must have been on some level, a breath of fresh air to be able to communicate with his father. I guess the question remains as to how much power of the deity was within him. If we say that he was fully God and fully human, we'd view the prayer as less of a plea and as more of a talk with one whom you love dearly and respect, as a son to a father. I would tend to agree that Jesus placed himself under the will of the Father on Earth as a means of redeeming his creation.

One more quick thing, I really don't think that Jesus was totally abandoned by God on the cross. We say God can't look upon sin, yet we also say that God will never leave us nor forsake us. Does God turn his back on me when I sin? Does that mean that scripture only applies to us? There is no doubt that Jesus was in unimaginable spiritual and physical agony. Yet, couldn't there be another reason for his words? Could these be words of completion?

Thanks, John, for much to contemplate! And thanks, Christy, for the book lead.

At [2:15 PM, January 27, 2007](#), [David Bruce Hughes](#) said...

Well, I have devoted a lot of thought to this exact question. I even wrote an entire book about it. You can read more about it on my blog.

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