

Garden of Gethsemane, Sermon Delivered  
at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

[14 April 1957]  
Montgomery, Ala

*In this Palm Sunday sermon, King declares, "You can stand up amid despair You can stand up amid persecution You can stand up amid disappointment You can stand up even amid death But you don't worry because you know God is with you You have made the transition You have faced life's central test"<sup>1</sup> Vowing to replicate Jesus' obedience to God's will, King cries, "Wherever He leads me, I will follow I will follow Him to the garden I will follow Him to the cross if He wants me to go there" The following text is taken from an audio recording of the service*

[Choir singing]

There is hardly anyone here this morning who has not at some time been pushed to the rugged edges of life There have been times that all of us felt that a cloud of despair had come to blot out the joyous glitter of a distant star of hope So often we have been left standing amid the surging murmur of life's restless sea We have been frustrated and disillusioned, bewildered and on the brink of despair<sup>2</sup> There have been times that we felt like giving up We felt that we couldn't make it any longer This has been an experience characterizing the lives of men and women in all generations—religious men, unbelieving men For instance, we turn back to the pages of the Old Testament and we hear an earnest believer like Isaiah in the midst of the Babylonian exile crying, "Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself, O God of Israel"<sup>3</sup>

We can run the long gamut of biography and come up to modern life And we can hear an earnest believer like Carlyle saying, "It seems that God sits in his heaven and does nothing"<sup>4</sup> We can turn to a noble writer and literary genius like

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<sup>1</sup> The following Sunday, King commented that he had preached a sermon on Jesus' experience in the garden of Gethsemane "just last week," indicating that he delivered this homily on 14 April 1957 (King, Questions That Easter Answers, 21 April 1957, p. 288 in this volume)

<sup>2</sup> In early 1957 supporters of segregation bombed four African American churches as well as the parsonages of MIA vice president Ralph Abernathy and white minister Robert Graetz In March 1957 the MIA put out a leaflet titled "Segregation Hasn't Been Licked" that depicted the damage (in *Papers* 4.4)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Isaiah 45:15

<sup>4</sup> King paraphrases Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p. 163

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Shakespeare and hear him crying out through the lips of Macbeth that "Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"<sup>5</sup> We can hear that noble Negro poet in the midst of the streak of his poetic genius, crying out about life

A crust of bread and a corner to sleep in  
 A minute to smile and an hour to weep in  
 A pint of joy to a peck of trouble  
 And never a laugh but the moans come double  
 And that is life<sup>6</sup>

We can hear a pessimistic philosopher like Schopenhauer crying out amid the despair of his life that life is "an endless pain with a painful end"<sup>7</sup> And the strange thing is that we all come to those moments when we feel like crying out with these believers and these disbelievers of distant days We feel like giving up, and life is now standing on the rugged edges And we stand on the brink of despair

I would like to take your minds back across the centuries this morning to our Lord and Master and at least demonstrate the fact that even Jesus confronted this experience when life was pushed out to the rugged edges, when the deep cloud of despair surrounded him at every point He had lived for about thirty-two years And he had gone around doing good healing the sick, feeding the poor, preaching the gospel to the captives<sup>8</sup> And in the midst of all of that, he was coming to a point that men wanted to get rid of him We can see him on that day when he was getting ready to go to Jerusalem Jerusalem was the center of Palestine at that time, it was the center of the religious world And now, at the culmination of his ministry, he prepares to go to Jerusalem And we can see the crowds as they greet him He is entering Jerusalem now, the triumphant entry And we can hear them as they cry—cry their loud hosannas<sup>9</sup>

This is Palm Sunday you see This is the day that people praise Jesus This is the day that people talk about the good things he's done This is the day for loud and vociferous hosannas But Jesus knew, knew that this was just the beginning of that week He knew that before that week was over, that he would move from the loud hosannas to the dark and deep voice of "crucify him!"<sup>10</sup> He knew that before that week was over that he would move from the high mountain of praise to the deep valley of condemnation He knew that before that week was over that the glorious sunrise that had characterized his Palm Sunday would be transformed into a dark sunset that would bring in Good Friday He knew that. So he prepared himself for it

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5 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, act 5, sc 5

6 King recites Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "Life" (1895)

7 King may be referring to Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, 3 462 "In the whole of human existence suffering expresses itself clearly enough as its true destiny Life is deeply sunk in suffering, and cannot escape from it, our entrance into it takes place amid tears, its course is at bottom always tragic, and its end still more so"

8 Cf Luke 4 18

9 Cf Matthew 21 1-9 "Hosanna" is an ancient Hebrew exclamation that means "pray, save [us]!"

10 Cf Mark 15 12-14

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And it is an interesting thing that Jesus was aware of the fact that this was ahead and he set out and he went on He didn't stop He knew that this would come through his Jerusalem experience but he went on The Bible tells us that just before facing the darkest moment of his life, before facing Good Friday, he went out and decided to talk with God And it is standing there with all of its glaring dimensions, it stands there in the form of a garden of Gethsemane

And when he came to this point and Jesus realized that he had to face death, when he realized that there were those around who would seek to destroy him and take his life, he went to pray He took some of his friends with him And we can see him as he prepares to go into that garden, and he says to his friends, "Watch and wait while I pray" And he went into there, into the garden to pray and he came back first and discovered that his friends were asleep<sup>11</sup> This is the mystery and the strange thing of life, that when we come to the difficult moments of life, when we come to the crisis situations of life, we always have to face it alone One preacher preached a sermon on this very text and he called it "The Loneliness of Christ"<sup>12</sup> And isn't this the true picture of life? That the time that we need our friends most, that is the time that they seem so unconcerned and so apathetic Even at our best our friends misunderstand us And when we come to the moment that we need them most, we find them asleep That seems to be the long commentary of life He had to confront it alone

Oh, it is true that in many of the experiences of life our friends help us and they give us kind and consoling words The story comes down from the late Dr George Truett of Texas that a big fire broke out one day in a large hotel in a southern city<sup>13</sup> And in the midst of this fire, the fire engines came out from all over It became so extensive that fire engines from other cities had to be called in And there they stood with their nets and their ladders fighting the fire And it came to a point that it seemed that the fire was out, and they were pulling the ladders down and they were letting the nets in and getting ready to leave The fire was now under control and had been put out It lasted for several hours And now everything was clear And it was under control Just the time that the people were leaving, all of the persons working there prepared to leave They were getting on the trucks, ready to drive off And just at that moment, a little voice was heard screaming to the top of its voice And at the moment everybody stopped, wondering where this voice was coming from. And they looked up to the top of that hotel, some fifteen or sixteen stories, and there at the top of the hotel they saw the face of a little white girl on the very top floor And immediately the fire chief called the firemen back And he called forth the youngest and bravest fireman and he said to him, "Go up and rescue this little girl" They placed the ladders back, the nets were waiting and the crowd came back, standing there, in all of the tension and the anxiety of the moment The young

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<sup>11</sup> Cf Matthew 26 36-45

<sup>12</sup> King may refer to Frederick William Robertson's (1816-1853) sermon "The Loneliness of Christ," in *Sermons Preached at Trinity Chapel, Brighton, by the late Rev Frederick W Robertson, M A* (Leipzig, Germany Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1861), pp 227-241

<sup>13</sup> King refers to an illustration in George W Truett's sermon "What to Do with Life's Burdens" (Truett, *A Quest for Souls*, p 22)

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fireman started ascending the ladder and going up and up and up until he reached the top. And he got there and reached in the window and rescued the little girl. And he started back down the ladder.

As he descended the ladder, everything seemed all right. But then he got about middleways the ladder. At that moment the fire that they thought was out broke out again. Flames began to leap from all sides and billows of smoke began to break forth. And the young brave fireman lost his courage. He lost his strength and he began to falter there on the ladder and everybody stood there in fear, wondering what would happen. They were afraid that the fireman would fall, they were afraid that he would lose his hold and that he would fall there and kill himself and kill the little girl. The fire chief came forth at that time. He called forth all of the firemen around and he cried out in terms that rang out all over the space that they stood in. "Cheer him on!" [*recording interrupted*] and finally the cheers from the ground reached the ladder, the middle, where the young man was with the little girl. The cheers reached his ears. And when he heard the cheers from below, something happened to him. And he began to brace up, he began to regain his courage. He began to regain his faith and he regained his strength. And when he heard those cheers and they came close to him, he started once more to descend the ladder. And as a result of the cheers, as a result of the support from below, he was able to come on down the ladder and bring the little girl safely to the end.

Oh, my friends, so often in life we come to tragic experiences, the cheers and encouraging words of our friends and loved ones help us on. We are able to regain our courage and to regain our strength and to regain our power because of the cheers of friends. But we can't always depend on that. Suppose Jesus had depended on that? He would have never made it through. Did not his friend Peter deny him?<sup>14</sup> Did not his friend Judas betray him?<sup>15</sup> Did not his other friends run on back to Galilee?<sup>16</sup> When Jesus had to stand amid the darkness of Pilate's judgment hall, there were no cheers.<sup>17</sup> When Jesus had to confront the darkness of the cross, there were no cheers. When Jesus had to stand amid Golgotha's hill, there were no cheers.<sup>18</sup> He had to face it all alone.

And this is the tragic picture of life, that at our darkest moments our friends often go to sleep. The time that we need them most is the time that we don't find them. Oh, our friends are often with us in our days of triumph. They are always with us in our days of victory, in our days of popularity. But so often our friends leave us standing alone when we stand in the midst of defeat. So often our friends leave us standing alone when we stand amid the dark experiences of life. So Jesus confronted the long story of history, that when we come to the darkest moments of life, when we come to the crisis situations of life, we have to stand alone. For even our best friends are so often apathetic and non-concerned, unconcerned. Even our best friends leave us at the moment that we need them most.

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14 For an example of Peter's denials of Jesus, see Matthew 26:69-75.

15 For an example of Judas' betrayal of Jesus, see Luke 22.

16 Cf. Matthew 26:56.

17 Cf. Matthew 27:2, 11-26.

18 Cf. Matthew 27:33-50.

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So he faced this experience. He went there in [*recording interrupted*] "Father, if thy be willing let this cup pass from me"<sup>19</sup> Jesus didn't want to die. Now maybe you misinterpreted Scripture if you think Jesus wanted to die. As some fundamentalists would say Jesus came in the world [*knowing in the beginning?*], knowing that he was going to die, that he desired to die. But that's not true, according to the Scripture. It says in glaring terms that Jesus didn't want to die [*recording interrupted*] "Father, if it is thy will, let this cup pass from me." In other words, "Father, keep me from dying. Keep this bitter experience from coming to me." And that was altogether a human experience. We have so often projected Jesus so far into the divine realm that we have forgotten about his humanity. Jesus not only experienced the glow of the divine, but also the tang of the human. And Jesus there, with his human nature, cries out, "Save me. I don't want to die. Take this cup from me."

There is nothing abnormal about that. That's altogether human. No young, normal human being wants to die. No normal human being wants to face the disappointments of life. Philosophers have told us throughout the generations that there is something of a surge and a quest for happiness and to avoid pain on the part of human nature. All of human beings have a desire to fulfill life through pleasure and happiness rather than through pain. That's the natural, normal desire.

Here is a mother whose son is getting ready to go off to war, whose son is getting ready to be taken away to the far-flung battlefields of the world. That mother has to face the thought and the possibility of her son never coming back again. And it is altogether normal and natural for that mother to pray to God to save her son. Nothing abnormal about that. It's altogether natural for that mother to pray to God, "Let this cup pass from me."

Yes, here is a person facing some incurable disease, caught up in bed for years and years and years with a disease that seems never to pass away. And it is altogether normal and natural for that person in the midst of the agony of life to cry out, "God, let this bitter cup pass from me."

Here is a young lady, who has always had the desire for life, and all of its beauty fulfilling itself in marriage, with all of the beauty that goes along with it. Here she comes to an age that it seems that that opportunity will not come. It is altogether natural and normal for that young lady to cry out to God, "Let this cup pass from me."

Here is a beautiful couple, married and always brought up with all of the longings and all of the aspirations of beautiful and noble children. It seems that because of biological difficulties, it isn't working out. It's altogether normal for that couple to cry out to God, "Let this cup pass from me! Oh, God, how much I desire children." There is nothing abnormal, there is nothing unnatural for men and women in the darkest moments of life to cry out to God, "Let this cup pass from me." That's a normal, *natural* desire.

And there we find Jesus, in the midst of his humanity, in the midst of his naturalness, crying out to God, "Let this cup pass from me. I don't want this disappointment. I don't want to die. Let it pass from me." But then it didn't stop there. There

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19 Cf Matthew 26:39

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was something after that We read after that “nevertheless,” “nevertheless” And after that “nevertheless” is the essence of religion After that “nevertheless” is the ultimate test of one’s devotion to God After that “nevertheless” is the ultimate test of one’s character After that “nevertheless” is the ultimate test of one’s loyalty. “Let this cup pass from me, nevertheless, not my will, but Thy will be done ”

And this, you see, is the central test of an individual’s life This is the test How one moves out from “let this cup pass from me” to “nevertheless”<sup>20</sup> This determines your life This determines how you will live it This determines how the very destiny of your life unfolds, how you are able to move from “let this cup pass from me” to “nevertheless” This is the great transition, and this is the test of an individual’s life. This is the central test of life We must learn the rigorous test of moving from “let this cup pass from me” to “nevertheless” Few people learn the lesson And they end up in all of the misery and all of the agony and all of the frustration of life because they can’t quite jump from one to the other They live life on “let this cup pass from me” And they try to, when they see that the cup is still there, they try to get away from it through diverse methods and manners And they end up more frustrated They try the method of escapism. And sometimes in trying to get rid of this cup, some disappointment, some other experience, they take certain attitudes and they take certain things that they think will help them escape the experience. That is why some people become dope addicts and others become alcoholics because they do not have the power and the stamina to make the transition And in an attempt to solve it themselves, they take something to escape And they find themselves unable to face the responsibilities of life, and that presents a crisis And so, in an attempt to get away from this difficult decision of facing responsibilities, they try to escape.

But the tragedy is that you can never escape And these things only serve as temporary alleviations, not ultimate solutions to the problem And that becomes merely a sort of passing answer to an ultimate problem And the psychologists tell us that this is no answer, for it is a tragic answer People who try the method of escapism when they face a bitter cup end up in psychological maladjustment They tell us that the more and more we try to escape the difficult decisions of life, the thinner and thinner our personalities become, until ultimately they split That’s one of the reasons for schizophrenic personality Have you seen people who have used so long methods of escape and escape and escape until their personalities have become split? It is because this is no answer

One must learn to make the transition from “let this cup pass from me” to “nevertheless, not my will, but Thy will be done ” And God grant this morning as you go out and face life with all of its decisions, as you face the bitter cup which you will inevitably face from day to day, God grant that you will learn this one thing and that is to make the transition from “this cup” to “nevertheless” This, you see, is the test of your religion This, you see, is the thing that determines whether you go through life devoted to an eternal cause or whether you go through life depending on your own finite answers which really turn out to be no answers This is the thing that

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<sup>20</sup> Fosdick, “Facing Life’s Central Test,” in *A Great Time to Be Alive*, p. 218 “And the central test of our lives now is whether we can take that next step—‘Nevertheless’”

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determines whether you can rise out of your egocentric predicament to devotion to a higher cause. This is what Jesus was able to do and this is the lesson that he presents to us today and in all generations, the way to make the transition.

And do you know how he made it? Simply through a positive and constructive and abiding faith in God. That was the way he made the transition. He didn't depend on his friends. Your friends will deceive you a lot. You can't depend on that in all of the experiences of life. If you're going to depend on friends, the transition is difficult and almost impossible sometimes. He didn't depend on money, because he didn't have that. Money can't make this transition for you. And oh, haven't we looked through life and we see people with so many of the things that we call great? They are successful out in terms of man's standards for success and yet they can't make the transition. I read so often, here is somebody here with all of the wealth, all of the beautiful homes that one could expect, all of the money that one could think of. And yet we see them committing suicide and we wonder what happened. It is because they thought money could make the transition. Here is somebody with all of the culture, all of the academic achievements that one could ever attain. And yet we see them frustrated and disillusioned, cynical about life. It is because they thought philosophical judgments and scientific rationalizations could make the transition. But that can't do it.

Oh, my friends, this morning my answer to you is that God is the answer. Are you standing amid trials and tribulations? Well, God is the answer. Are you disappointed with something about life? God is the answer. Are you standing amid some experience that seems so dark that you will never get through? God is the answer. Young man, are you standing amid life and trying to make some great decision and it seems that the decision can't be made and you're giving your life to something low and yet you cry out for the high? Well, God is the answer. Are you looking for some way to run through the streets of life and remain calm amid war? Well, God is the answer. That is the only answer that I have for you this morning. And Jesus had the answer. He had it a long time ago. And this is the thing that carries us over. This is the thing that makes the transition.

I can look back at Job and I can see him as a young man with all of the riches of life, with a beautiful family, with all of the wealth in terms of cattle and other things that anybody could desire in life, with all of the happiness that one could think of. And then one day, all of these things left. His cattle gone, all of his wealth gone, his family gone, all of these things taken from him. And there he stands in life. There he stands before the universe stripped of everything that he had once had.<sup>21</sup> And I can hear him as he cries out in some form, "Let this cup pass from me." Oh, it's dark for Job now. I can hear his wife as she comes up to him and said "Job, curse God and die. Just curse him."<sup>22</sup> And I can see Job in the midst of his despair, as he cries out: "Oh, that I knew where I could find him, that I might come to his dwelling. And I will set my case in order before him. Oh, I'm tired of this thing, it's dark for me. I can't face it!"<sup>23</sup> But then I can see Job as he turns to God, and he turns away from

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Job 1-2

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Job 2:9

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Job 23:3-4, 16-17

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himself, and he gets away from his wife And I can hear him cry out, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him"<sup>24</sup> I can hear him crying out again, "I know that my Redeemer liveth and that he shall stand forth on the latter day of the judgment"<sup>25</sup> I'm talking about turning to God this morning

I can hear Jeremiah at one time crying out, "Cursed be the day that I was born"<sup>26</sup> I'm tired of this thing, Lord, all of my enemies surrounding me, and it seems that I'm defeated on every hand " But I can hear that same Jeremiah crying out again, "The word of God is upon me like fire shut up in my bones And I know, I know that somehow this God is my God And He's going to stand with me"<sup>27</sup>

I can hear Habakkuk crying out on one time, "And it's mighty dark for me Lord And I can see the wicked prospering on every hand And it seemed that the longer we try to live good, the more we suffer I'm tired of this, Lord! And I'm going to sit on the watchtower and just wait until you answer me"<sup>28</sup> But then I can hear that same Habakkuk once more crying out after he had turned to God that, "The Lord God is my strength and my refuge. He makes my feet like hind's feet and causes me to walk across high places."<sup>29</sup>

I can hear even Jesus himself, standing amid the agony and darkness of Good Friday, standing amid the darkness of the cross And out of the pain and the agony and the darkness of that cross we hear him saying, "My God, my God, *why* hast Thou forsaken me?"<sup>30</sup> But then, in the midst of that he turns to God And he keeps his eyes on God He keeps his vision on God And *out* of the midst of all of that, *that isn't the last* word that we hear from the cross For out of the midst of the darkness and the agony of the cross, we hear something else We hear a voice saying, "Into Thy hands I *commend* my spirit"<sup>31</sup> And then we can hear him saying, "Not my will, but thy will be done "

Now you got to learn that, my friends, and when you learn that you can stand up amid any condition because you know that *God* is with you no matter what happens You can stand up amid despair You can stand up amid persecution You can stand up amid disappointment You can stand up even amid death But you don't worry because you know God is with you You have made the transition You have faced life's central test

And so I'm going away this morning, I don't know about you, but I'm going away determined that wherever He leads me, I will follow<sup>32</sup> I will follow Him to the garden *I will follow* Him to the cross if He wants me to go there I will follow Him to the dark valleys of death if He *wants* me to go there *Not my will*, but Thy will be done And when you can cry that, you stand up amid life with an *exuberant* joy. And you know that God walks with you Even though you walk through the valley of the

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24 Cf Job 13 15

25 Cf Job 19 25

26 Cf Jeremiah 20 14

27 Cf Jeremiah 20 9-11

28 Cf Habakkuk 1 13-2 1

29 Cf Habakkuk 3 19

30 Cf Matthew 27 46

31 Cf Luke 23 46

32 King refers to William A Ogden's hymn "Where He Leads I'll Follow" (1885)



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shadow of death, you know that *God* is there<sup>33</sup> Even though you stand amid the [grant?] shadow of disappointment, you don't despair because you know God is with you Father, let this cup pass from me It's dark down here Tired sometimes, disappointing experiences all around, sickness, facing the death of loved ones, facing disappointment, highest dreams often shattered, highest hopes often blasted Let this cup pass from me, nevertheless, not my will, but Thy will be done And somehow you've given us a way to live when we say that We remain stable amid the storm There is an equilibrium that comes And while the others all around fall down in despair, and even suicide, and even death, we keep going and keep singing

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound  
That saves a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now I'm found,  
Was blind, but now I see<sup>34</sup>

And we can keep singing that because we have decided to cry, "Not my will, but Thy will be done "

Let us pray Oh, God our gracious Heavenly Father, in the glory of this Palm Sunday, help us to realize the darkness of the week ahead, with its Gethsemane, yes, with its Calvary, with its dark cross Oh, God, help us to realize though that in the midst of this, there is a way out as we face life's central test, the test of making the transition from "Let this cup pass from me" to "nevertheless " God grant that we will discover that it can only be faced by giving our ultimate allegiance to Thee and to a religious view of life Help us to realize that God is the answer In the midst of all of our trials and tribulations, God is the answer In the midst of all of our disappointments, God is the answer Help us to live with that philosophy And by that we will be able to live until we meet Thee in all of Thy eternities In the name and spirit of Jesus we pray Amen

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<sup>33</sup> Cf Psalm 23 4

<sup>34</sup> King quotes John Newton's hymn "Amazing Grace" (1779)