Jesus had known all along that he would suffer and die. He told his disciples so, very graphically, on numerous occasions. It is important to note that Jesus’ death is all part of God’s plan. Nothing happened by accident (Acts 2:23).

Yet in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was clearly shaken by his sufferings. In Mark 14:33, we read, “he began to be deeply distressed and troubled,” and in verse 34, Jesus said, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” He asked in verse 36, “Take this cup from me.” Throughout the Gospels we see the enormous power and dignity of Jesus. He claimed to be judge of all the earth, the eternal Son of God. His assurance of his sonship is always absolute. What, then, can we conclude from the fact that he trembled before his death?

The only possible reason that he shrank from his execution is that he was going to suffer a more terrible death than anyone else ever has suffered or will suffer, and in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus seems to get a foretaste of the agony of that suffering and separation. The death of Jesus was qualitatively different than any other death. Jesus would face more on the cross than suffering at the hands of his friends (who abandoned him) and enemies (who tortured and killed him). The physical pain was overshadowed by the spiritual experience of cosmic abandonment by the Father. Jesus is “distressed,” “overwhelmed,” even though the crucifixion hasn’t yet begun. The words abba and “cup” help explain why.

Abba is an Aramaic diminutive term for “father.” It is the equivalent of our term “daddy” or “papa.” “The cup” is an Old Testament metaphor for the wrath of God on sin. Ezekiel 23:32 – 33 reads, “You will drink . . . a cup large and deep; it will bring scorn and derision . . . the cup of ruin and desolation”; and Isaiah 51:22 reads, “the cup that made you stagger . . . the goblet of my wrath.” Jesus was going to experience that “cup.” The wrath of God was going to be the torment of separation from his abba.

We know something of this pain. The more intimate and important a relationship, the more torturous it is when it is severed. For example, if your friend says, “I reject you,” it is bad, but if your best friend or your spouse says, “I reject you,” it is far worse. This helps explain both the depths and nature of Jesus’ suffering on the cross. God forsook Jesus on the cross. We cannot imagine the intimacy and
lifegiving love that the Father and Son had together. It was total, eternal, and infinitely richer than any love we can know. Their intimacy was from all eternity. The loss of it was an infinite and unique pain. And Jesus is experiencing a foretaste of that in the garden.

Yet, even though Jesus knows what his mission will cost him, even though there is still time to pull out (after all, everyone was asleep and the betrayer had not yet arrived) — Jesus stayed. The very idea of a single figure bearing the punishment for all our sin is staggering. Nahum 1:6 reads: “Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Yet that is precisely what Jesus did. For us.