

Sermons on Matthew

Gethsemane

Matthew 26:36-46

With Study Questions

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Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, "Sit here while I go and pray over there." ³⁷ And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. ³⁸ Then He said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me."

³⁹ He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You *will*."

⁴⁰ Then He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "What! Could you not watch with Me one hour? ⁴¹ Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed *is* willing, but the flesh *is* weak."

⁴² Again, a second time, He went away and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done." ⁴³ And He came and found them asleep again, for their eyes were heavy.

⁴⁴ So He left them, went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. ⁴⁵ Then He came to His disciples and said to them, "Are *you* still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Rise, let us be going. See, My betrayer is at hand" (Matthew 26:36-46).

Introduction

Somewhere somebody said, "Don't write checks with your mouth that you can't cash with your actions." Jesus had just predicted that all His followers would be scattered like sheep. They disagreed: "**Peter said to Him, 'Even if I had to die with You, I will not deny you!' And so said all the disciples**" (Matthew 26:35). Now they had an opportunity to prove it.

Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, "Sit here while I go and pray over there." And He

took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed (Matthew 26:36, 37).

A Sorrowful Jesus

Jesus entered this small field, or garden, called Gethsemane (which means oil press) and separated Himself from all of His followers except Peter, James and John. This is where the betrayal would take place. It is as if Jesus put His followers at a safe distance, bringing only the three for what appears to be two purposes: His natural desire for human support and companionship, and proof of the legitimacy of His prediction of their defection.

Luke informs us that Jesus went to Gethsemane **“as He was accustomed” (Luke 22:39)**. He was not retreating but advancing to His enemy. He knew they knew where to find Him.

We then see in Jesus something seldom seen by the apostles – He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. The gospel writers are emphatic regarding this sorrow. Matthew writes of grief and sorrow. Mark records Jesus being “troubled” (Mark 14:33) and Luke says He was seized with anguish or agony till His sweat became **“like great drops (literally clots) of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22:44)**.

You must wonder how this made the apostles feel. This same Jesus who, when a great tempest arose so that the boat was covered with the waves, remained calmly sleeping. And when He awoke, He chided the apostles for their fear and little faith (Matthew 8:24-26). And how He is described as having great anguish in the most extreme of terms. What did He know that they didn't?

I don't like flying. Every bump, every weird sound makes me nervous. I look to the attendants. They calmly walk up and down the aisles in the most extreme turbulence talking to each other about what restaurant they'll eat that night. It helps a little. What doesn't help is when there is a weird sound and I find them looking at each other with a “what was that?” look on their faces. What do they know that I don't?

The apostles did not misread the anxiety of Jesus. He now verbally confirms the depth of His grief.

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⁴⁴ So He left them, went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. Then He came to His disciples and said to them, "Are *you* still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Rise, let us be going. See, My betrayer is at hand" (Matthew 26:38-46).

On His Face in Prayer

The exceeding sorrow of which Jesus speaks compels Him to remove Himself, even from the three, and fall on His face to pray. The Bible records many different positions for prayer (someone counted up to eleven). But there are times when the circumstances of life cast us into a desperate posture. And there is no more desperate posture than face down before God. There is value in corporate prayer, but we also see that since the gaze of others can be distracting, it is valuable from time to time, to seek isolation to avoid any preoccupation.

From Whence the Sorrow?

But the question remains: From where does this sorrow, anguish and deep distress in Christ come? He is Jesus the righteous, the sinless – can we not properly add "courageous" to His list of virtues?

It is interesting to note that not all anxiety and grief is necessarily sinful! Though our sinful natures almost always mix anxiety with a lack of trust and rebellion, it is simply not the nature of the case that sorrow is

always sinful, for Christ never sinned. But would it not be wise of us to seek to fathom that which would cause the Savior such torment?

The Garden of Gethsemane can be, and has been, the source of untold volumes. But this morning I would constrain my comments to the value of grasping this event in relation to the following topics: The humanity of Jesus; the source of His torment; and how this expresses God's love for His children.

The Humanity of Jesus

It is the pinnacle of Christian doctrine that Jesus is fully God and fully man. There is perhaps no record in the life of Christ where His humanity is more fully exposed there in Gethsemane:

Humanity in Prayer

We see His humanity in His desperate posture in praying, as we've already observed. God would have no need of praying to God. His prayers were no mere charade. He was a Man (certainly a sinless man) praying to God. Jesus was a man who grew in wisdom and stature (Luke 2:52). He was a man

who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, ⁸ though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered (Hebrews 5:7, 8).

We should not think of a sinless man as a superman. As a man, Jesus had the same need of prayer as we.

Humanity in Desire for Companionship

We see His humanity in His desire for companionship – such a small request **“Watch with me”** (literally ‘keep awake’) at which they miserably failed due to **“sorrow” (Luke 22:45)**. Even in His dark hour Jesus doesn't fail to concern Himself with His followers. He knew their lack of prayer

would be a major component in their failure (a general rule for humanity in all things). He also encourages them with an affirmation of their willing spirit – though accompanied by the weakness of the flesh.

Humanity in His Petition

We see His humanity in His petition which He makes three times, **“O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.”**¹ Numerous explanations have been given for this prayer.

Perhaps it was instructive so that His followers might feel His terror. It was not beyond Jesus as the Master Instructor to utilize various forms of hyperbole or even pretense for the instruction of His followers. John records Jesus praying aloud at the tomb of Lazarus for the express purpose of the people standing by (John 11:42). In Luke’s account of the Road to Emmaus he records Jesus pretending He was going to walk past His potential students for the desired effect. Paul states he wished that he would be accursed (Romans 9:3) and Moses that he be blotted out of the book of life (Exodus 32:32) to make various points. It is not entirely unreasonable that Jesus was do something along these lines.

But it is more likely that this prayer was a result of Christ’s divine power being, as Calvin put, concealed for a time². After all, as a man, it makes sense that He was not given the comfort of omniscience. At a glance the prayer seems to have Jesus not contemplating disobedience but wondering if there is some other way.

Thy Will be Done

Seeking to splice the humanity and deity of Christ is tricky business. But it must be understood that it was Jesus, the Man, who sought the comfort of others, excruciatingly prayed, and would soon face His betrayer and cross. But Jesus was a sinless man and His prayer is quickly tempered with a clause which should attend all our prayers – **“nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.”**

¹ Although the second prayer seems to lessen the “if it is possible” aspect of the prayer.

² Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

I've heard it said that this makes us ambivalent in our prayers - that God would rather have us demand what we desire. But James instructs us that it is but an arrogance that would lead us away from preferring God's will to our own.

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit";¹⁴ whereas you do not know what *will happen* tomorrow. For what *is* your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.¹⁵ Instead you *ought* to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that."¹⁶ But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil (James 4:13-16).

The True Source of Torment

But what was the true source of torment for Jesus? Was it the mere temporary separation of soul and body (2 Corinthians 5:8)? When Paul wrote, "**For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain,**" (Philippians 1:21) was he exhibiting a greater equanimity of spirit at the prospect of dying than Jesus? At first glance it seems irreverent for Calvin to suggest that if it was the mere fear of death which caused such torment in Christ we would have to say "**that he had a cowardly and effeminate mind.**"³

But it would be exceedingly short-sighted for us to think Christ would suffer such anguish while confronting the same event other men faced with courage. Death would not bring such torment to Christ if it did not include the stark reality of His knowing that, for Him, death meant facing the judgment of God. Jesus was soon to face an "**inconceivable vengeance.**"⁴ Like boil after boil our sins would be loaded upon Jesus.

Jesus, who knew no sin, would become sin (2 Corinthians 5:21). The horrors of hell, which neither human words nor the dreadful metaphors of burning dumpsites⁵ can sufficiently describe, would soon be imbibed by this Man. And Jesus would not feel the justice of God for one man only but the Lord would lay upon Him "**the iniquity of us all**" (Isaiah 53:6).

³Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System;Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

⁴Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System;Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

⁵ E.g. Gehenna.

In one hymn we sing that “the Father turns His face away,” and this **“Why hath thou forsaken me”** sense of abandonment is certainly included. But God is omnipresent (all of God is everywhere all the time). So when the Father turns His face away, it is not merely the sorrow of being ignored. It is the absence of God’s pleasure which is replaced by the presence of God’s displeasure – God’s justice. How many millions of hells would Jesus endure for all who would ever seek refuge in His death – His atonement – His payment for sin!

It is this which caused His sweat to fall to the ground **“like great drops of blood”** (Luke 22:44).

God’s Love for His children

And how does this express God’s love for His children? Succinctly put,

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. ¹⁷ For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved (John 3:16, 17).

Love is an attribute which is defined by the character of God Himself (1 John 4:16). I am sure you’d agree that the pure and unspoiled love within the Trinity ascends too high for our grasping. Yet it was God’s plan to prepare a body (Hebrews 19:5) for His own Son to be sacrificed. And the Father’s motive behind this was His love for us.

It is not as if Jesus was our friend and the Father our enemy. It was the Father’s will to save. The author of Hebrews writes that it was **“By that will (the Father’s will) we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once *for all*”** (Hebrews 10:10 – parenthesis mine).

I don’t think I have it within me to sacrifice one of my sinful children for everybody in this room. And we must be reminded that parents and their love for their children was not merely a convenient instructional tool discovered by God while perusing His creation. It is an easy argument that God created parents and children for the expressed purpose of teaching us of Him and His relationship with His own Son. And if I, **“being evil”**,

have such a love for my children, **“how much more”** (Matthew 7:11) is the Father’s love for His own Son.

Let Us be Going

And it is my prayer, that in all this, we would gain a greater appreciation of the Father’s love for us. The passage concludes with Jesus saying **“Rise, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand”** (Matthew 26:45). The verb used for **“let us be going”** is not a retreat on the part of Jesus. He rather advances to meet the enemy. Along with my prayer that we would more deeply know the Father’s love for us, is the prayer that we would trust in Him, and in Him only to meet, and defeat, our greatest enemy.

Questions for Study

1. Was Jesus seeking to avoid His enemies by entering Gethsemane (pages 2, 3)?
2. How would you express what Jesus was going through in Gethsemane (page 3)?
3. How would you describe Jesus’ posture in prayer (page 4)?
4. Describe the two-fold nature of Jesus (page 5).
5. In what ways was the humanity of Jesus revealed in Gethsemane (pages 5-7)?
6. What was the true source of the torment of Jesus (pages 7, 8)?
7. How does this express God’s love for us (pages 8, 9)?