

Watch Him and Pray

Matthew 26:36-46

Mark Vroegop

36 Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." 37 And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. 38 Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." 39 And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." 40 And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? 41 Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." 42 Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." 43 And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. 44 So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. 45 Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46 Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."

The aim of Matthew's gospel is to clearly show a Jewish audience that Jesus is indeed the Messiah who has come to bring God's kingdom to the entire world. Matthew's purpose is a theological one. He is doing more than just collecting the greatest stories of Jesus's life. Every narrative, every conversation, every section of teaching is designed to show the reader something very important about who Jesus is and what he did.

Matthew's message is reaching its most climactic moment during the week that we often call Holy Week or The Passion. During this week we see some of the most poignant pictures of what Matthew wants us to see. Take, for instance, the powerful image that we saw in Jesus's transformation of the Passover into the Lord's Supper. Or take Jesus's prediction of the failure of Peter and the departure of all the disciples. You see, what Matthew is doing here is crafting a picture of Jesus from multiple angles. And he does all of this to show us a Messiah unlike anyone had anticipated – a suffering Messiah.

Watch Him, Love Him, Follow Him

Now I know that you know that Jesus is a suffering Messiah. However, Matthew wants you to feel it. He wants you to understand that Jesus entered your world, but – even more – he wants you to enter his world so that you can understand. He wants you to really "get it" that Jesus was a man; he was deeply troubled; he was alone; he wrestled with God's will; and it was all

very, very dark. But there is a purpose beyond a morbid observance of his pain. **Matthew wants you to watch him so that you'll love him so that you'll follow him.**

This morning I'm going to show you five different images of Jesus, and I hope that as we look at them you see two things: 1) the beauty of redemption through suffering savior, and 2) the comfort of redemption through a suffering savior. In other words as we are looking at these angles of Jesus keep two thoughts prevalent in your mind: "He did this for me" and "He really understands."

A Savior Who Grieves

The location of this event is the Garden of Gethsemane. This garden was located on the Mount of Olives, just outside the city of Jerusalem and across the Kidron Valley. The name Gethsemane means oil press¹, and it was likely a walled garden that contained a grove of olive trees and perhaps a place to press out valuable olive oil. According to John 18:2, this location was a favorite place for Jesus and his disciples to visit. It may even belonged to a disciple or a friend of Jesus.²

Jesus and the eleven disciples (remember Judas is now gone) make their way to the garden because Jesus needs a private place to pray. There is a clear sense that his impending sacrifice is beginning to weigh down his soul. He wants them near him, but he needs some solo time with his Father – "Sit here, while I go over there and pray" (26:36).

He leaves eight disciples behind, and invites his inner circle – Peter, James, and John – to go with him. And it is in the presence of these three that the text says "he began to be sorrowful and troubled." The words mean deep grief and distress.³ I can only guess that it is the kind of emotion that feels like it is just boiling inside of you; the kind of feeling that you know is going to come out and it is almost uncontrollable.

Jesus is grieving deeply. In verse 38 he opens his heart to his close friends and says, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here and watch with me." Interestingly the phrase "my soul is very sorrowful" is almost an exact quotation of the refrain in Psalms 42-43 when the Psalmist says, "my soul is cast down within me" and "why are you cast down, O my soul?" Jesus goes even further. He says that is a sorrow "even to death." In other words it is the kind of anguish that threatens life itself. Think of this statement like when you say, "What I'm feeling is killing me!" This is an emotion that comes from places within your heart that you never knew existed, a kind of grief that is almost so frightening that you need to tell someone about it.

¹ D.A. Carson, The Expositor's Bible Commentary – Matthew, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1984), 543.

² Leon Morris, The Gospel According to Matthew, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 666.

³ Carson, 543

This is a remarkably human and sensitive moment, Jesus tells his disciples that he is struggling and hurting. And he asks them to stay with him and watch – keep awake – with him. He’s hurting and he wants them to personally help him (“with me”).

This really is a remarkable moment. It should make us marvel at the extent of Christ’s suffering as he anticipates the absorption of God’s wrath. He knows what the holiness of God is like, and it is no wonder that he trembles. What’s more, we can find great comfort here that Jesus knows what it is like to experience deep, gut-wrenching, untamable, and frightening grief.

The implication of a grieving savior is deeply personal. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is able to sympathize with our weakness (Heb. 4:15). The effect of this is that while we may not fully understand what Jesus went through; he understands what we go through. His suffering not only purchased your forgiveness; it abolishes the possibility that you are ever truly alone in your grief. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me” (Psalm 23:4). He is a savior who grieves. Watch him. Love him. Follow him.

A Man Who Wrestles

The next scene, I think, is deeply moving. Jesus leaves the three disciples behind him (Luke 22:41 – “a stone’s throw away”) as he finds a place to pray. He desires the support of his closest friends but Jesus will wrestle alone. This is a lonely struggle.

According to verse 39, Jesus fell on his face in prayer. Just think of this image: the Son of God laying prostrate on the ground with his face in the dirt of the garden. In so doing he has taken the lowliest position of all because of the depth of what he feels and what he is about to ask.

Jesus’s prayer has two parts:

“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” He prays in a very personal way. Mark’s account (Mk 14:36) reads “Abba, Father.” Both indicate a level of intimacy. His request focuses on “the cup,” which is a pregnant metaphor for not only just the suffering and death that he will face; it also refers to God’s wrath (see Isaiah 51:17). It anticipates the moment when Jesus will be forsaken by his Father (c.f. 27:46).⁴ He knows what is in store for him.

But it is in the four words – “if it is possible” – that we really see the deep wrestling that is taking place in Jesus’s heart. What exactly is he asking? It seems that Jesus is facing the same temptation and struggle that Satan originally laid before him in Matthew 4:1-11 – an alternative path to accomplishing God’s will. So while Jesus certainly knows that anything is possible for his Father, he is really wrestling with the reality of what is before him. In prayer, he inquires

⁴ Carson, 544.

about “an alternative route by which to fulfill the Father’s redemptive purposes.”⁵ He prays with gut-wrenching agony. Here is another powerful picture of Jesus’s humanity.

“...Nevertheless, not as I will but as you will.” But in the midst of his prayer an important and redemptive eclipse happens. In the midst of all the agony, fear, and dread, Jesus conquers the temptation to consider another path with the hope of doing the Father’s will. And here is something that we must see. Jesus’s entire life was centered on doing the will of the Father; it was his mission and purpose. And now it is that purpose which triumphs over this deep moment of agony. In the midst of the darkest moment of Jesus’s life, his commitment to his Father’s will holds fast.

He knows who he is. He knows who the Father is. He knows what his purpose is. And he knows that the painful path will actually be the safest if it is the Father’s will. He loves his Father, and he is willing to trust that there is no other way.

This is the turning point of God’s redemptive plan. The sin of Adam and Eve in the first Garden was to exert their will about God’s and look for another path. The difference between the Garden of Eden and the Garden of Gethsemane couldn’t be greater.

“In the first garden “Not your will but mine” changed Paradise to desert and brought man from Eden to Gethsemane. Now “Not my will but yours” brings anguish to the man who prays it but transforms the desert into the kingdom and brings man from Gethsemane to the gates of glory.”⁶

So here is a savior who wrestled deeply with the implications and the cost of doing the Father’s will in ways that you and I can’t even imagine. And through his suffering he learned obedience which made him eligible to be the *source* of eternal salvation! Listen to what the writer of Hebrews says about Jesus:

7 In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. 8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. 9 And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him (Heb 5:7-9).

Therefore you ought to marvel at the gracious choice that Jesus makes, and you ought to know that there is never a time in your life that Jesus can’t relate to your struggle to do what God wants you to do. Watch him, love him, follow him.

⁵ Carson, 544.

⁶ Carson, 545.

A Teacher Who Cautions

After spending some considerable time in prayer, Jesus returns to the disciples (v 40). Imagine the emotional trauma of what he has just experienced, and then imagine what it must have been like to find his closest friends asleep. Luke gives them a little break when he says that they were “sleeping for sorrow” (Lk 22:45). In other words, they were exhausted. Even still, you can hear the disappointment in Jesus’s words: “So, could you not watch with me one hour?” (v 40). It is one thing to fall asleep in church; it is entirely different to fall asleep when your friend is in crisis and when he has asked you to help. Jesus is all alone in ways that we can only imagine.

Jesus now gives them some important instructions. No longer is he just asking them to help him. Now he is exhorting them about the danger that is before them. The focus is no longer on watching “with me.” He tells them to pray because of temptation: “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt 26:41).

The disciples are not aware of the dire moments that are just around the corner. If they would have known what is to come, they would have not been sleeping. Therefore, Jesus calls them to spiritual alertness and focus – “watch and pray.” They are going to need help for what is coming. Thus he calls them to pray for the help that they will surely need.

But it is the final thing that Jesus says that is most memorable. “The spirit indeed is willing but the flesh is weak” (v 41). What does he mean by this? He is reminding them, yet again, that the human desires and intentions often fall short because of weakness. The disciples have seen this to some extent, but they will see it at an entirely different level in the next few hours. Jesus knows what is coming, and he warns them that all the willingness, desire, and eagerness in the world are not going to protect them from failure.

Isn’t it amazing that Jesus – even in his darkest, loneliest moment – is still trying to help the disciples grow and mature. Even in a disappointing moment (maybe unlike any other in his lifetime) he is still teaching them. But this is Jesus. He teaches even when he is on the cross (e.g., “Father, forgive them...” – Luke 23:34). And both by his example and by his instruction he teaches his disciples that they need to prevail in prayer because they need God’s help to make it through this moment. They, like him, should be seeking the help of the heavenly Father. It is beautiful to behold the grieving and wrestling Son of God seeking help from his Father. Watch him, love him, follow him.

A Messiah Who Endures

Jesus leaves the disciples again (v 42) for another time of prayer. We have less information about this specific prayer, but Matthew does tell us what Jesus said. "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done."

The prayers in verses 39 and 42 have similarities but there are also some differences. Some commentators suggest that this prayer is just a repetition of what Jesus said before. But it is interesting to note that Jesus now forgoes praying anything about his will or the possibility of another way. It seems that those two issues have changed.

While I don't want to make a major point out of the differences, it does seem to me that this prayer is more focused on the required endurance that he must embrace. Earlier he had prayed, "if possible may this cup be taken from me." (v 39). But now he says, "if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done" (v 42). The first says, "Take this cup away." The second says "I'll drink it so that you can take it away." Notice that. "I'll drink it so that you can take it away." The way to bring this to an end is not escape but to endure. Don't miss this! The hope for Jesus was not found in an escape from the plan of God while looking for an alternative; hope was found in willing endurance while trusting the Father's heart.

Listen to what Hebrews says about the value of endurance and its connection to Jesus:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted (Heb 12:1-3).

Jesus, by his endurance, made redemption possible. But he also shows us that endurance through divinely ordained events – even as horrible as the cross – are part of God's plan to make us like his Son. Jesus shows us the wisdom of spiritual endurance when a loving God is in control. Jesus shows us that God is worthy to be trusted. After all, it was by Jesus's endurance of God's cup of wrath that you been given the cup of blessing. Watch him, love him, follow him.

A Son Who Obeys

The paragraph ends with Jesus returning from another prayer time only to find the disciples asleep again. A third time (v 44) he went by himself, sought the heart of the Father, and said the same words in prayer. After this time of prayer is complete, Jesus returns to the disciples.

Upon his return, Jesus knows that the hour has come. He probably could hear the mob of soldiers coming from Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives. Therefore he tells the disciples that it is now too late to pray and prepare; the time is upon them. The ESV says, "Sleep and take your rest later on." The NIV says, "Are you still sleeping and resting?" Jesus is no longer going to urge them about spiritual readiness. The hour that he has been talking about for so long has finally come.

What Jesus says next needs to be read very slowly: "See the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners" (v 45). It is a remarkable statement. The Son of Man, the one who has healed the blind, raised the dead, healed the lepers, and taught the people about God's kingdom, is now going to be betrayed and taken by sinners. Up the mountain is coming a band of sinful men – one of his disciples, the religious rulers, and soldiers – to arrest him. The irony of this moment is so clear.

But notice what Jesus says in verse 46. "Rise, let us be going; see my betrayer is at hand" (v 46). In other words, Jesus is not running away. The hour has come. God's will is to be done. He is confident, bold, and resolved. "Jesus has prayed in agony but now rises with poise and advances to meet his betrayer."⁷

Here is the beauty of God-centered obedience. Jesus knows what is coming, but he **knows** what is **coming!** He sees beyond the immediate!

So when you look at this text, your heart has to just leap with gratitude that Jesus walks to his betrayal and arrest like that because it was that walk that eventually brought to you eternal life. Is it any wonder then that the book of Hebrews invites us to join Jesus in our own walk, knowing what is coming?

12 So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. 13 Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. 14 For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come (Heb 13:12-14).

This is obedience - to walk outside the city, knowing that there is reproach. But at the same time knowing that we are seeking a city that is to come. And with this knowledge of who Jesus is and what he has done, we are compelled, even driven, to go with him outside the camp. We are called to join him in obedience. We've watched him, we've loved, and now we are called to follow him.

⁷ Carson, 545.

Your Loneliest Moment?

The scene in the Garden of Gethsemane is one of the tenderest moments in the entire Bible. We see Jesus hurting, struggling, and grieving as he considers the cost of doing God's will. This pain and agony was all part of the great redemption that he purchased for us. But this scene is also a huge comfort to us when we walk through the dark and lonely moments of life. This is an important text when you feel all alone, like no one understands, and when even your closest friends don't "get it."

Have you ever had a moment like that? Maybe you're there right now. Well, the good news of this passage is that Jesus not only paid for your sins; it also means that he completely understands your pain right now.

He faced the loneliest moment in the universe so that you'd always know that you are never really alone.

Jesus's suffering was personal so that your redemption and your comfort could be personal too.

Therefore, watch him, love him, follow him.

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