GETHSEMANE

Matthew 26:31–56

Key Verse: 26:39

“Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.’”

Do you pray? What do you think about prayer? Children used to be taught to “say their prayers” before going to sleep. So, many people grew up thinking prayer is some kind of chore or duty. Others think it’s an effort to get God to do what we want. Because it doesn’t always work, prayer can often seem futile. So once, a lofty theologian said, “I don’t pray; I meditate.” What *is* prayer? Early in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus gave his disciples some simple instructions on prayer. He told them to do it not to get people to see them and be impressed, but in secret, only for God to see. Then he taught them the Lord’s Prayer. Some people think we should be praying only those words. Today is a unique passage in which we see Jesus himself praying. At first it seems like just an old story, but actually it’s a fascinating lesson on what prayer is and how we all should pray. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his words today.

As we saw in verse 30, after their Last Supper together Jesus and his disciples were on their way to the Mount of Olives. They’d eaten the meal after sunset, so by now it was quite late. The Gospels tell us that Jesus used to take his disciples to this place at night when he happened to be in Jerusalem. Evidently it was a place where people with no money, if they were willing to sleep outside, could go at night. The Mount of Olives is just east of the city of Jerusalem. Down in verse 36 it says that Jesus took his disciples to a place called Gethsemane. This word literally means “olive press.” It was somebody’s private olive grove. There are several theories about where it exactly was, but actually nobody really knows. Obviously it was a secluded place, and probably not too easy to find. Jesus may have gotten permission from the owner to stay with his disciples there at night.

During the Last Supper we saw how Jesus was trying to prepare his disciples for what lie ahead. He told them the painful news that one of them would betray him. He told them that the Passover bread represented his body, and the cup, his blood. Now he gives them some more painful news. Look at verse 31. The expression “fall away” in Greek literally means to stumble, and in English it’s our word “scandal.” What a scandal, not only that one of the Twelve would betray him, but that the other Eleven would all lose their faith that night! Disciples are supposed to be followers of Jesus, but they wouldn’t be able to do it. To back up his prediction Jesus quotes from an Old Testament prophet named Zechariah: “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered” (Zec13:7). It’s not just about inevitability; it’s Jesus’ way of saying that their failure in a sense really isn’t their fault. Without a shepherd, sheep cannot *but* scatter. It’s Jesus’ way of telling them that he’s already forgiven them.

And he goes on to say something even more hopeful. Read verse 32. His death by crucifixion would totally devastate his disciples. But it wouldn’t end with that. Jesus says, “But after I have risen…” He’d already predicted this four times before. He’d always said that on the third day he would be raised to life. He was so sure of it that now he even promises to meet them again in Galilee, after his death and resurrection. Galilee was where most of the disciples were from, and after his death they’d go back there, trying to resume their old lives. But the risen Jesus would meet them there again. It shows that though they would give up, Jesus would not give up on them. They would fail, but Jesus’ hope for them would not fail. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we all have hope.

How did they respond? Peter replied, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will” (33). He was so confident of himself. He saw himself as the most loyal one. Despite his strong character, he didn’t really know himself yet. What did Jesus say to Peter’s pledge of loyalty? “Truly I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times” (34). Jesus isn’t just trying to win the argument; he’s trying to help Peter come to know himself. Though it’s painful, it might be one of the deepest expressions of love. How does Peter take it? Read verse 35. Again, it was another kind of confession of love to Jesus. Sadly, their confidence and human enthusiasm wouldn’t cut it at all.

Now let’s look at verses 36,37. Jesus goes to this place with his disciples, and he wants to pray. And we notice that he takes only Peter and the two sons of Zebedee with him, meaning James and John. These were the three he first called to be his disciples (4:18–22). These were the three who were at the top of the list when he called his Twelve disciples (10:2). These were the three he took with him up the mountain when he was transfigured (17:1,2). Among his Twelve disciples Jesus had been trying to get closer to these three. Now in his final hours on earth he takes these three with him again. It’s like they’re his best, closest friends. And at this time, he confides in them. Read verse 38. On the surface these words don’t seem so special, but really they’re shocking. Jesus is confiding his most personal struggle to these three. Though he’s their Teacher and Master, and a worker of miracles, he’s also a human being, and he’s their Friend. Why are his words so shocking? Partly it’s because he’s actually struggling with going through with what he’s predicted. How could he be trying to back out *now*? And partly it’s shocking that he’s asking these three to keep watch with him. What does it mean to “keep watch”? Jesus isn’t just asking them to stand on guard to protect him while *he* prays; he’s asking them to actually *join* *him* in prayer. To “keep watch” means to watch out spiritually, to watch out for the devil’s temptations. The only way for all of us to do that is to pray. A main aspect of prayer is to avoid being deceived and tempted by the devil. So in the Lord’s Prayer Jesus taught us to pray, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (6:13). No matter how strong we may think we are, we all need to be aware that the devil is out there, trying to lure us away from doing the right thing, from being close to God. If we don’t pray, we won’t even be aware of the devil’s schemes in our lives. One of his strategies is to get us to give up on prayer. Another is to get us to depend on our own strength.

But what stands out here most of all is that, at his weakest moment Jesus is asking these three to pray for him. Why would he be asking such weak men, about to desert him, to pray for him? What help could *they* possibly be? But Jesus didn’t think that way. He knew that as human beings we’re all so weak, but he believed we all gain spiritual strength when we join together in prayer. If Jesus asked his closest colleagues to pray with him and for him, how much more should we! Americans pride themselves on rugged individualism. We like to try to go it alone, like the Lone Ranger. Of course prayer has to be personal, but it’s also important when we’re struggling not to try to go it alone but to ask our closest spiritual friends to pray for us. They’re the best friends we have.

Now let’s look again at Jesus’ words in verse 38: “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” What could it mean? He’s so transparent, so vulnerable, *admitting* his weakness. *That’s* really hard to do for most men; many women don’t like to do it, either. It’s especially hard for leaders. The Greek word means to be very sad or deeply grieved. Why is Jesus suddenly so sorrowful? It’s because, as he said earlier, his “appointed time” is fast approaching. He’ll be betrayed and deserted by his disciples, condemned to death by the religious leaders, mocked, flogged and crucified (20:18,19). It’s all about to get *real*. Who can go through such a horrible experience? Who can understand what he’s going through? Jesus is not a robot on autopilot, mechanically going through with his destiny. The author of Hebrews describes him: He shared in our humanity; he was fully human; he was made like us in every way (2:14,17). Then he writes, “Because [Jesus] himself suffered when he was being tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Heb2:18). Jesus was really suffering at this time, suffering because the devil was tempting him. We saw how the devil tempted him at the outset of his earthly ministry (4:1–11); now he’s tempting him at the end. He knows his vulnerable spot is his humanity, his desire to live, to be with those he loves, and he’s trying to exploit it. Just like Jesus, our desires and emotions to live, enjoy life with those we love, in and of themselves aren’t sinful or unspiritual, but they can become our weak spot when we’re trying to obey God. Jesus knows how hard it is to do what God wants, to resist the devil’s temptations, because he himself experienced it. So if *he* had to struggle to overcome himself in order to go through with God’s plan, how much more should *we*!

Jesus is such a shepherd, taking his three top disciples with him to pray. But then it gets *personal*. Read verse 39. “Going a little farther” has deep meaning. Jesus didn’t stop in his great sorrow, or with all his concerns for his beloved disciples; he went a little farther, coming to God personally in prayer. Often this is when we really pray, when we feel totally overwhelmed, when we have no strength within ourselves to do anything. It says that Jesus “fell with his face to the ground.” It’s the expression of utter helplessness; he has no one and nothing else to rely on but God himself. The first words Jesus utters here is “My Father.” These words have even deeper meaning. Prayer is not about talking to some abstract notion of God, or some great spiritual Power; it’s about talking to the very personal God, so personal that he’s actually our loving heavenly Father. In the Lord’s Prayer Jesus taught all of us to call God “our Father.” The right way to approach prayer is to realize who we’re talking to: he’s our loving heavenly Father, who deeply cares for us with all our weaknesses and problems, whom we can turn to at any time, who always hears us and who longs to give us what’s best. It’s so good to have a loving human father, but we all need to experience what it means to really call God “my Father.”

Next, we see in verse 39 that Jesus asks that “this cup be taken from” him. What’s the cup? It’s not the cup of wine at the Last Supper; it’s the cup of suffering and death. It’s the cup of becoming the atoning sacrifice for our sins, taking upon himself God’s wrath for our sins. It’s way more bitter than the bitterest drink we can think of. It’s way more than just the humiliation or physical torture of the cross Jesus was facing; it’s the spiritual agony of bearing the weight of all the sins of the whole world. But it wasn’t just Jesus’ cup; earlier Jesus told James and John that *they* would indeed drink from his cup, too (20:23a). All Jesus’ disciples are called to drink from his cup, to share in his sufferings to save people from their sins. This is why Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it” (16:24,25). So if we’re not struggling to take Jesus’ cup of self-denial and self-sacrifice, we’re not really following him.

Yet what we notice here is that *Jesus* didn’t want to take this cup, either! And it’s what he actually prays for! It’s another shock. How could he pray like that? Not go through with God’s plan? It seems like his prayer is a borderline sin. But it’s not. It’s another aspect of prayer. Prayer is getting totally honest with God. God doesn’t want to hear perfect theological words from us; he wants to hear honest words, real words, what’s really in our hearts. The Bible teaches us when we pray to cast all our anxiety on our Father God, who cares for us (1Pe5:7). We may not be able to talk honestly with people, but we can always be totally honest with God. We can tell him how we really feel. Some people pay a lot of money to talk honestly to a counselor. But what a privilege we have, to be able to talk to our Creator God like this, free of charge! So prayer isn’t a duty—it’s a wonderful refuge. It’s something we can do anytime, anywhere, when we feel all alone, or totally miserable—we can come to God and tell him all about it, and we can be sure that he hears and he cares. This is what faith is.

Read verse 39 again. Jesus concluded his honest struggle by saying, “Yet not as I will, but as you will.” This was his main prayer topic. In the Lord’s Prayer he taught us to pray, before anything else, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (6:10). It may sound abstract, but actually it’s a very practical prayer. When people we love seem to be going in a wrong direction, we should pray, “Your will be done” (Ac21:13,14). We may make this or that plan, but we should pray, “Your will be done” (Jas4:15). But praying for God’s will to be done is never easy. Why? Because we have our own will. Our desires often cloud our judgment. Sometimes we think *our* desires are *God’s will*. Unfortunately that’s usually not the case. Verses 42–44 tell us that Jesus kept praying, “May your will be done.” Sometimes we really don’t know *how* to pray. We might have many prayer topics that God may never answer, because they’re actually not his will. How do we know his will? His will is inscrutable (Ro11:33). But, when we pray according to his will, he hears us (1Jn5:14).

Why did Jesus pray for God’s will to be done, and why should we? The real reason Jesus prayed like this was because he loved God. He loved his Father God more than he loved himself, more than life itself. We learned that we need real faith to pray, but we also need real love for God in order to pray for his will to be done ahead of ours. The more we experience his love, the more we love him in return and can be willing to do anything to please him.

We notice in this passage a great contrast: the disciples slept while Jesus prayed. They slept not because they ate too much, but because they were relying on themselves. They seemed strong at first, but they ended up too weak to stay loyal to Jesus. Jesus seemed weak at first, but he ended up strong when the crowd came to arrest him. The disciples wanted to fight to prevent Jesus’ arrest, but Jesus refused because he already fought the spiritual battle in prayer. Jesus could have escaped by calling on his Father to send his angels (53), but he submitted to God’s will, willingly. Read verse 39 again. We can only praise and thank our Lord Jesus who prayed like this for us. May God help us learn from him how to really pray.