

Introduction

We are studying the final chapters of the gospel according to Matthew. Our goal is to progress through the events of the last days of Jesus making stops at the main events in those last couple of days. Our previous stop on the journey to the resurrection was the Thursday evening Passover meal that Jesus shared with his disciples. After Jesus instituted the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, Matthew tells us that Jesus and the disciples minus Judas went out to the Mount of Olives. At the foot of the mountain was a garden called Gethsemane, which means olive press. This garden is our stopping place today where we observe our Lord deal victoriously with incredible temptation.

[Read Text and Pray]

The writer of Hebrews informs us that Jesus is a great high priest. He intercedes for his people as one who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses because even though he never sinned he has been tempted as we are in every respect. The Garden of Gethsemane is the scene of Jesus' most intense temptation, and it is also the scene of a great victory. The main idea of this text is that Jesus faces excruciating temptation and victoriously overcomes. Matthew's description of this time of testing is of significant help for us on a number of levels. It helps us understand the unfathomable sorrow of Christ as he anticipated the horrors of bearing sin. It also helps us grasp how we must handle our most difficult temptations to sin. Here also is a model of how to pray about affliction and hardship and how to respond when God determines that there is no way other than the path of suffering. So let's dig in.

First I want you to see . . .

I. The Reprehensible Sorrow of Drinking the Cup

Gethsemane is thought to have been a walled garden belonging to a follower of Jesus who permitted him to make use of it as a place of retreat and prayer. And as he came there, as what seems was his habit, Jesus posted most of his disciples at the entrance to the garden. He took Peter, James, and John into the seclusion of the garden to pray. It was apparent to those three that as they moved deeper into the garden something grave was going on with Jesus. He became visibly upset. Matthew tells us, "He began to be sorrowful and troubled." And not only that, Jesus expressed it verbally: "My soul is very sorrowful, even unto death." The idea of the original language is that Jesus felt he was ENGULFED in SORROW. Normally, olives were pressed in this garden, but at this moment Jesus is the one being squeezed. He says it, I am so engulfed in sorrow I could die.

That is heavy. You know when someone in the room expresses deep emotion. You see it in their eyes and on their face. You hear it in their voice. And it seizes your attention. Your ears perk up. You feel it in your own being. Clearly these disciples felt it and they heard it in Jesus' voice and in his words. And Jesus declares his sorrow could kill him.

Coming from Jesus, this statement is stunning. Here is the One who spoke to frightened disciples in the midst of a turbulent storm, "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith." He stared the storm in the face and calmed it. In the course of his ministry, Jesus stared death in the face and overruled it. He confronted hunger and disease and overcame them. He slipped through the clamor of a violent crowd that wanted to throw him off the cliff. So, what in the world could cause him to be so grieved? It was the cup. He went a little further into the garden and exhibited his turmoil by falling on his face and praying to his Father, "if it be possible, let THIS CUP pass from me." What is the

cup? Clearly, he refers to the suffering of the cross. But is there something about the cross experience that was especially gut-wrenching for Jesus? I think so. The "cup" suggests the horror of facing the wrath of God for sins.

Listen to Psalm 75:7-8

. . . it is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another. For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed, and he pours out from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs.

Isaiah 51:17 calls out,

Wake yourself, wake yourself, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl, the cup of staggering.

Drinking the cup means having the wrath and judgment of God come upon you. To drink the cup would be to bear the sorrow, grief, agony, torment, affliction, distress, and woe of God's righteous and punitive exercise of hate toward evil. And Jesus would bear the wrath because he would bear the sin of his people. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid upon him the iniquity of us all."

The Levitical sin offerings graphically depicted the reality of transference. Whenever a person came bringing a sin offering, God's law instructed that they were to bring the offering—a bull, a goat, a lamb—to the tent of meeting before the Lord and lay their hand on the head of the offering. Thus a transfer of guilt was taking place. The sin of the human being was being laid upon the lamb, the goat, the bull. The animal was bearing the sin of the sinner. And then it was slain before the Lord. In essence the animal offering took on itself the sin and then took on itself the punishment for that sin. This is the cup about which Jesus is speaking—the sin itself and the wrath for the sin. He himself, writes Peter, bore (not just our punishment but indeed he bore) our sins in his body on the tree. As Paul says to the Corinthians, "[God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin."

It is one thing for a lamb, a goat, a bull to be brought to the tent of meeting. They haven't got a clue what is going on; they cannot feel sin and guilt and shame. But when the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world—Jesus—is on his way to the place of sacrifice, it fills his soul with sorrow and trouble. How can he who stills storms and laughs at death be shaken? How can he be troubled and feel sorrow? Is he not about to overcome? Yes, but in order to overcome what he must endure is the one thing that could bring this degree of sorrow and trouble to his soul. And here is why.

First, the holy one actually bears sin. He who knew NO sin was made to be sin. Sin is abhorrent to the holy. Sin in a human being in the presence of God is itself abhorrent. Think of Isaiah before the vision of the Lord in his holiness. He falls down and cries out, "Woe is me; I am undone!" If a sinful man recoils because of his sin in the presence of holy God, how much more will God himself recoil if sin is laid upon him! Only God can know how great was the agony of becoming the sin-bearer. But we can and should try to grasp it. We should see in Christ's agony even of the anticipation the great chasm that lays between God's holiness and sin. We see the length to which God was willing to go to save sinners. And it is incredible! And it should grip our hearts. The soul of Jesus was troubled because sin was laid on him.

Among the things we learn from Christ's agony is how reprehensible sin is to the holy and how we must hate sin. The Apostle Paul tells us to "Abhor what is evil and cling to that which is good. It will

aid Christ's followers in the battle with the desires of the flesh if we will hold before our eyes a vision of Jesus becoming engulfed with sorrow and trouble because of sin. We must learn to shudder at the idea of taking our sin lightly or entertaining a temptation to do that which unsettles his soul this way.

But second, the soul of Jesus was engulfed in sorrow because of the ensuing estrangement between himself and the Father. The holy Son always pleased his Father, and his heart's pleasure was to be in communion with his Father. Obeying the Father was not a duty of drudgery but a delightful privilege. And yet he was about to be forsaken and afflicted by this Father. The troubled and sorrowful soul of Jesus tells us how sweet and satisfying, how joy-filled and enriching is communion with God. For Jesus the thought that he would be without that communion for any space of time envelops his soul with grief.

By way of application, let me ask, "what is it that troubles you? What is it that fills your heart with sorrow?" Are you troubled over the swell of anti-Christian sentiment that is running rife in America? Are you troubled by circumstances in your life that aren't what you would like them to be? Are you troubled by the fact that you have to battle for holiness in your life? Are you sorrowful because of struggles with your health? But if there is one thing that should trouble you far more than any of these, it is the prospect of being out of fellowship with God. And if that troubles you, know this. Since Jesus has endured estrangement from the Father, you do not have to. Now, you can draw near to God and he will draw near to you.

But back to the fact that the Holy One had to bear the guilt of the unholy and the wrath toward that guilt. His anguish tells us a lot about his holiness and purity and how repugnant sin is to him. But it also tells gives us an idea of the severity of the torment of the wrath. Of all the things in life that Jesus experienced, it was the prospect of drinking the cup of divine wrath that brings Jesus to his face before his Father. The same anguish is what all will face who do not repent and exchange their sins for Christ's righteousness.

Finally, the sorrow and trouble of Christ demonstrate to us that we who are trusting in his work for us should be engulfed with gratitude and amazement. He went through what we deserved so we would be spared.

Charles Spurgeon tells of a well-known story about a school master. He threatened a particular incorrigible student that if he repeated his disobedient action, he would be publicly struck on the hand with his ruler.

It was not long until he had to make good on his threat. But the master could not bear that the boy should be punished. At the same time, he knew that the honor of the school and the maintenance of his own authority demanded that it should be so. With his ruler raised before the student, the master told the boys that he was willing to spare the erring student, yet that would mean he would break his word and they would not take him seriously in the future. Order would be lost, and the school would be dishonored.

After a few moments of silent thought, the schoolmaster took down the ruler and put it into the hand of the disobedient boy. He held out his own hand, instructed the boy to strike him. Thus the master received the punishment that was due to the boy. The outcome was that the boy respected the master and became a model student. Spurgeon commented, "Here is a faint picture of what God has done. In the person of His well-beloved Son, He says, 'I will suffer because you are guilty. Somebody must be punished for your sin, and if you suffer the just penalty for your evil deeds, it will

crush you to the lowest hell. You cannot endure it, but I Myself will bare My shoulders to receive the stripes which are your due. I will take upon Myself your sins, my law shall have a terrible yet complete vindication, I shall be just, and yet I shall be able fully and freely to forgive you, and to accept you.”

We need to understand as best we can the reprehensible, unfathomable sorrow, grief, agony, torment, affliction, distress, and woe for Jesus of drinking the cup. It lifts our eyes to a better grasp of the fact that God is holy and just. It also yields a better sense of what is packed into the statement “God loves sinners.” It leads us to worship and thankfulness.

It is on this basis that we come to God for forgiveness of sin. Your best efforts to please the one true and holy God are nothing more than more added pollution and corruption to which he must respond with added wrath. But if you will accept the substitutionary work of Christ—that he took your sin and the wrath due you upon himself, you will be saved. If you have thus been saved, then never stop standing in awe of him who endured God’s wrath for you. Give him praise; give him thanks; give him glory; give him your life one moment at a time.

The reprehensible sorrow of drinking the cup is really what this text is about, but there are a couple of additional lessons for believers. So, next, I want you to see . . .

II. How to Handle the Hardest Temptations to Sin.

As Jesus entered the Garden of the olive press late that night, he entered into his most severe hour of testing and temptation. Immediately after John the Baptist baptized Jesus, he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The beginning of his ministry was marked by temptation and now here at the end he is being tempted again. You see, it was the devil’s intent to keep Jesus from dying sacrificially. In the temptations in the wilderness, he sought to derail God’s plan by enticing Jesus to gain his promised kingdom by falling at his feet. Later he tempted Jesus through the voice of Peter when he blasted Jesus for suggesting that he would die. Peter had said, “You surely shall not die!” But in reply Jesus rebuked the devil: “Get behind me, Satan.” And here Jesus is instructing his disciples about withstanding temptation. He warned the three disciples he had brought into the garden with him to “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.” He said “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.”

In anticipation of the horrors of the cross, Jesus was being tempted to turn away. Perhaps Satan was suggesting to Jesus that this surely was not the only way. After all, this is what the devil is known for. He denies the truth. He denies and disputes what God has said. In another Garden, the Garden of Eden, in the earliest days of creation, he asserted to Eve that what God had said simply was untrue. To Jesus no doubt he was suggesting that there surely had to be a less painful way to reconcile sinners to God. So in this great hour of trial and temptation what did Jesus do? He prayed. In the first series of temptations, Jesus responded to Satan with the Scripture. Now he prays. If Jesus found it necessary to pray in temptation, how much more must we. Clearly this is the lesson he wanted the disciples to learn. They had all just declared with confidence in themselves that they would never fall away. Yet they did. Rather than disputing, they should have been listening. And instead of sleeping they should have kept alert in prayer.

Listen, prayer puts us on the offensive. And this is where we need to be in the pursuit of holiness. You do not become more and more holy by drifting. You and I do not drift our way into godliness. We must pursue it and prayer is part of the pursuit. We must discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness. So we cannot hope to grow into Christ’s likeness without spunk and moxie, without initiative, without ambition. And prayer is critical because here is where we tap into God and his

power. The branches of the vine must remain in the vine if they are to produce fruit. We are not remaining in him if we are not praying consistently. Paul tells Christians to put on the whole armor of God to be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. Yet he indicates that the armor must be accompanied by prayer. He says we must, "pray at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication."

When the darts of Satan are flying, remember Jesus in Gethsemane when he was being pressed. Cry out to your Father. Call on him for help. And align yourself with his will. Prayer is a critical component for overcoming Satan's trap.

Finally, I want us to learn from Jesus in Gethsemane

III. How to Pray About Suffering

God often moves in a mysterious way to perform his wonders. Oftentimes he works in perplexing ways. Oftentimes the night gets darker before the sun comes up. I do not think there is one of us here this morning who longs to suffer. I know I do not. But suffering of some kind is inevitable in our lives. There are some things that need to be accomplished in us that simply will not happen unless we suffer affliction.

But how do we pray about suffering? In the face of sorrow and a troubled soul at the prospects for suffering that lay before Jesus, let us see how he prayed. Here is what he said, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will but as you will." We should pray the same way: "Our Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass; nevertheless, not as I will but as you will." Jesus asked and submitted not once but three times. And yet after the third time, he arose and embraced the Father's will. "Behold the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going." It was the Father's will that he should be crushed and Jesus embraced that will.

Sometimes God may spare us from affliction and grief, but sometimes he will not because there is no other way for him to accomplish his purpose.

Similarly, the Apostle Paul prayed about his thorn in the flesh that the Lord would remove it. He asked three times. At last the Lord said to him, "No." He told him his grace was enough for him to endure. And Paul embraced God's will. He said, "Most gladly will I therefore boast all the more gladly of my weakness so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities." So that's the way to pray about suffering. Lord, remove it if you will, but if you don't, I submit. Have your way.

Conclusion

I close with the words of a great old hymn.

Have Thine own way, Lord. Have Thine own way.

Thou art the Potter; I am the clay; mold me and make me after Thy will while I am waiting yielded and still.

Have Thine own way Lord; Have Thine own way

Search me and try me Master today

Whiter than snow Lord wash me just now

As in Thy presence humbly I bow

Have Thine own way, Lord; Have Thine own way

Hold over my being absolute sway

Filled with Thy spirit till all shall see

Christ only always living in me

Prayer

Benediction

May Christ the Lord be exalted in us his people.

He was filled with anguish and sorrow at the prospect of bearing your sin load and mine. He shuddered at the thought of bearing the wrath due to our sin. Yet he did not flinch. He did not turn away. He said to the Father, Not my will but yours be done. May we watch and pray so that we may say the same. And may the Lord bless and keep you for this very purpose.