

## Matthew 26:36-46

### Introduction

We've seen very powerfully in every part of Matthew's Gospel that Jesus' lived His life with a very clear sense of purpose and meaning. In Luke, we can even see this when He was only a boy twelve years old. After celebrating the Feast of Passover in Jerusalem, Joseph and Mary had begun the journey home. Somehow, they assumed that Jesus was with others in the caravan, but after a day's travel, they realized He was missing. Returning again to Jerusalem, they found Him in the temple. When they asked Him about His actions, the twelve-year-old Jesus responded: "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I *must* be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49) Years later, when Jesus came to John for baptism, He responded to John's objections like this: "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15). Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus always demonstrated the same sense of certainty and assurance in everything that He did and said.

Jesus knew from the very start exactly what His Father had sent Him to accomplish. It was when Jesus first called Matthew, the tax-collector, to be His disciple that He said to the Pharisees: "*I came* not to call the righteous, but sinners" (9:13). Jesus assured the disciples of John: "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away... then [My disciples] will fast" (9:15). To His own disciples, Jesus said, "Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (10:38). To the Pharisees who asked Him for a sign, Jesus would only say this, "Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (12:40; cf. 16:4). Finally, there came a point when Jesus had withdrawn from Jewish territory as far north as Caesarea Philippi. There was that powerful moment when Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God... and Jesus promised that He would build His church, and that the gates of hell would never prevail against it" (16:13-20). And then "From that time," Matthew says, "Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (16:21; cf. 16:24; 17:12). When Jesus and the disciples arrived back in Galilee, on their way to Jerusalem, Jesus said again, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day" (17:22-23). And finally, when they had reached the last stage of their journey after leaving Perea: "See we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day" (20:18-19).

The goal of Jesus' life and of His ministry was always the cross. Jesus lived every moment of every day always conscious of the sufferings and death that awaited Him. Jesus traveled to Jerusalem *knowing* that He went there to be crucified. As they were nearing Jerusalem, Jesus said to His disciples, "The Son of Man *came* not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (20:28). A few days after His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus said to His disciples, "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified" (26:2). When a woman came to Jesus and anointed Him with perfume at the house of Simon the leper, Jesus received her anointing with these words: "In

pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial” (26:12). Then came the last supper that Jesus shared with His disciples – the Passover meal. As they reclined at the table Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me... The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed” (26:21, 24). “As they were eating, Jesus took bread... and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body.’ And he took a cup, and... He gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’” (26:26-28). And finally, just before they left the upper room to go to the Mount of Olives, to a place called Gethsemane, Jesus said to His disciples, “You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered’” (26:31).

Never has any man lived like Jesus lived. Never has any man walked knowingly and purposefully to His own death as Jesus did. Jesus lived His entire life under the shadow of the cross, and all that that cross would mean for Him. He walked willingly and purposefully to Jerusalem *so that He might suffer and die*, enduring the holy wrath of God in our place.

So what kept Jesus from shrinking away – from turning aside? What gave Jesus the resolve to keep going, day, after day, after day? *First of all*, it was the peace and joy that Jesus had in His Father’s love. At His baptism, Matthew tells us that “the heavens were opened to Him... and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’” (3:16-17). Just before Jesus began His final journey to Jerusalem, He was transfigured before the disciples, and “behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’” (17:5). And so it was only Jesus who could ever say: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (11:27). Jesus has come as far as He has, with such calm purpose and resolve, because He is fully conscious not only of His Father’s will, but also of His Father’s *love*. Now, as He leaves the upper room with His disciples, He knows that His betrayal into the hands of sinners is only hours away.

**I. Matthew 26:36** — Then Jesus went with [His disciples] to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here, while I go over there and pray.”

Luke tells us that throughout His ministry, Jesus would *often* slip away to the wilderness and pray (Luke 5:16, NASB; cf. 9:28; Mark 1:35; Mat. 14:23). It was in prayer that Jesus always sought His Father’s *will*. I think of the time when Jesus prayed all night long before choosing His twelve disciples, one of whom would become a traitor (Luke 6:12-16). But it was also through prayer that Jesus strengthened Himself in His Father’s *love*. John tells us how Jesus prayed, “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24). Now, with the cross looming, Jesus must feel a need for prayer as He never has before. “Jesus went with [His disciples] to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, ‘Sit here, while I go over there and pray.’”

**II. Matthew 26:37** — And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled.

The NET Bible says that Jesus began to be “anguished and distressed.” This is something entirely new. Over and over Jesus has spoken of His sufferings, and always with a sense of calmness and resolve. Always, Jesus has thought most of His disciples as He sought to prepare *them* for what was to come. But now, in these final moments before His arrest, Jesus begins to be anguished and distressed – sorrowful and troubled. He who has always done His Father’s will finds now that His Father’s will is to drink to the very dregs the cup of bitterest suffering. He who has always delighted in the bliss of perfect holiness must now face the reality of bearing in Himself *our sin* (1 Pet. 2:24). He who has always strengthened Himself and rejoiced in His Father’s love must face the prospect now of being struck by His own Father’s sword. And as Jesus begins to feel in Himself the terrors of these things that He must soon endure, He is overcome with *anguish and distress*.

**III. Matthew 26:38** — Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death...”

The NASB says, “My soul is deeply grieved.” The NIV says, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow.” The HCSB says, “My soul is swallowed up in sorrow.” The NLT says, “My soul is crushed with grief.” Even if we should ever find the perfect translation, it still could never express the anguish that Jesus felt.

“My soul is very sorrowful, *even to death*.” This world is full of anguish and sorrow. Sometimes this anguish and sorrow can literally feel like it is physically ripping our insides out. But we have never known sorrow like this. As we think of the sufferings of Jesus, our disadvantage is that there is nothing in all the world to compare them with. Here is the mystery of the incarnation – that the divine Son of God should be so fully human—so fully one of us—that He could know anguish and grief such as we ourselves have never known. Luke writes: “And being in an agony He prayed more earnestly; and His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Luke 22:44). The writer of Hebrews says that “in the days of His flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears” (Heb. 5:7).

Apart from that terrible moment on the cross when Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” in all the Gospels it is only here that we are given a glimpse into the true torment and suffering of the cross. Up to this point, Jesus has faced the cross with calm purpose and resolve. And after this point, Jesus will be “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He [will open] not his mouth” (Isa. 53:7). But here in the garden, we can witness for a moment what makes our own hearts recoil with terror and despair.

Whatever sufferings we may ever endure, whatever sufferings have ever been inflicted upon another—and these have been many and horrific—may it never be said that Jesus cannot understand. There are no pat answers to the question, Why does God allow such pain and suffering in the world? But perhaps one of the best “answers” is just to meditate on the sufferings of Jesus, who *alone* in all the world was perfectly innocent. As we meditate on the sufferings of Jesus, may we better understand the *guilt* of our own *sin*, and also the perfect and precious *obedience* of our Savior. Paul says:

- ✓ Philippians 2:8 — Being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death...

**IV. Matthew 26:38** — “Remain here, and watch with me.”

Here is more mystery – that the divine Son of God should be so fully human—so fully one of us—that in the hour of His greatest need He should want our companionship. Matthew tells us that after leaving some of His disciples to wait in a certain place, Jesus took “*with Him*” Peter, and James, and John. And even when He was so overwhelmed with sorrow that He went off by Himself about a stone’s throw away (Luke 22:41), He still desired that Peter, and James, and John should “remain here, and watch *with me*.” One commentator translates like this: “[Stay] awake with me.” It can be a lonely feeling to be the only one awake, but what that would have been like for Jesus, in the Garden, I can’t possibly say. In His humanity, and as He felt Himself tormented with the terrors of the cross, Jesus just wanted to know that someone else was *awake* with Him. Oh that I might have stayed awake with Him. Truly that would have been the very least, and yet I know also the very most that I could have done.

**V. Matthew 26:39** — 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.”

It is only the hardened heart of unbelief that can read these words and not be at some level completely undone. There is mystery here beyond our ability to even begin to comprehend. There is darkness and terror here that makes us literally quail and shrink back in dread. There is also *beauty* here that ravishes our souls.

“He fell on His face and prayed...” He threw Himself down on the ground and called out to God with loud cries and tears.

“My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me...” Always in the Old Testament, the “cup” was the cup of suffering, and it was especially the cup of God’s righteous judgments and wrath. As Jesus begins to feel more and more within Himself the terrors of this “cup,” He literally, physically, vocally cries out in longing that He might not have to drink it. “If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me.” But didn’t Jesus already know? Hasn’t he already stated over and over what *must* happen, and what *must* take place? If we stumble over this question, then we have not understood the full *humanity* of Jesus, or else we have never known what it truly is to suffer, or else we have never conceived of what Jesus is facing. In our mind and intellect we may know something, but our emotions and our will shrink away. Jesus knows, as He has always known. But now, as the hand that holds the cup is held out to Him, He does not want to drink it. With every anguished fiber of His being, He does not want to drink it. No one in all the history of the world has ever not wanted to do something more than Jesus did not want to drink this cup. And so He writhes in anguished turmoil on the inside, and on the outside He lies prostrate on the ground, sweating great drops of blood. And we watch, and we know – that *we* are the ones who *caused* His agony.

How can He do what *every* strained and anguished fiber of His being does not want to do? Even as Jesus begins to feel in Himself the terror of God’s sword, and the cup of God’s wrath, He **prays**. He prays, “*My Father*.” And so He strengthens Himself in His Father’s *love*. My brothers and sisters, if Jesus can pray “My Father” at even a time like this, can there *ever* be a time, then, when we are not duty bound to *trust* our Father’s love? Jesus also prays, “*Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will*.” And so He strives to surrender His own tumultuous emotions, and feelings, and will, to the righteous and holy will of His Father, *who loves Him*. And in so doing, He has left an example for us – that *we* should follow in His steps. But on that night, there was nothing the disciples could do except to stay awake and watch with Jesus.

**VI. Matthew 26:40a** — And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping.

Why did He come to the disciples? He came because in His humanity, He needed to know that they were there, and that they were watching *with Him*. But He found them sleeping. He found us sleeping. In the hour of our Savior’s greatest need, we couldn’t stay awake. I’m ashamed to say that my own mind could wander, even as I was meditating on these very verses. What Jesus endured in the garden, He endured all for us – while we slept, leaving Him to be completely, totally, utterly *alone*.

**VII. Matthew 26:40b-41** — And he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

There is no sarcasm in Jesus’ words. Because of His *love and compassion*, Jesus wants to help Peter and the disciples see their weakness – otherwise, how will they ever be convinced of their need to watch and pray? To the Peter who said that he would *die* with Jesus if necessary, Jesus says now, “Could you not *watch* with me one hour?” “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.” Watch and pray so that you may stand firm in the hour of testing. Pray now not for Me, but for yourselves. Even now, somehow, Jesus thinks of His disciples.

“The spirit indeed is willing.” The Greek word actually means “*eager*” (Rom. 1:15). So Jesus says, “Yes, I know that your spirits are willing and eager.” “But the flesh is weak.” How many of us have ever felt the willingness, and even the eagerness of our spirit to be faithful to Him in true obedience and love, only to be overcome by the simple weakness and frailty of our flesh? It’s in those moments when we’re most eager and most willing that we’re also most forgetful of our incessant, constant, ever-present *weakness*. And so Jesus tells us what to do: “Watch [stay awake, keep alert, be vigilant] and *pray* [**pray, PRAY**] that you may not enter into temptation.” *Pray* that you may stand firm in the hour of testing. **Behold** – how Jesus cared for us, even when we had left Him to face His torment and suffering all alone.

**VIII. Matthew 26:42** — Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”

Something has changed now. No longer does Jesus pray that the cup might pass from Him. Now He prays: “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” Though the

outcome was never in doubt, the battle *had* to be fought. It had to be fought because He was truly made *like us*. And so in witnessing this battle we may, possibly, just begin to fathom the sufferings that Jesus endured for us, and in our place.

**IX. Matthew 26:43–44** — And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again.

The disciples go on sleeping. Jesus prays unceasingly. While we slept, He fought the battle all alone. And then it was over.

**X. Matthew 26:45–46** — 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. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand.”

### **Postscript**

It is not possible to hear of Christ’s agony in the Garden, and then walk away without being responsible for what we have heard. What Christ endured in the Garden was a pointless exercise in futility if it does not demand from us our total, joyful surrender, obedience, trust, and love. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way:

- ✓ Hebrews 5:7–9 — 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 [reverent submission]. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, *he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.*