

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
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Matthew 26:36-46 “Agony in Gethsemane”

Intro. We have all experienced sadness and depression. Perhaps it was due to some great loss that you experienced, even the loss of your favorite team! Perhaps it was due to some problem that seemed to overwhelm you. Have fear and anxiety gripped your heart? How did you handle your emotions? Did you give in to them and remain in that emotional state for days, or even weeks? Did Satan use your emotional state to lead you into the sin? Did you turn to alcohol, drugs, or sinful pleasures? Or perhaps during a time of bad emotions you became unloving toward family members and friends. I have observed that during times of depression or even elation we can become very self-centered and self-absorbed.

Well we are going to see from our text that Jesus experienced sadness and even depression in His life, especially as He faced the Cross. The prophet predicted that He would be “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3). And this morning we are going to see how He handled His emotions. We are going to see how He gained the victory over His emotions, as well as the temptations that He was facing. I want you to be equipped to share in the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ over bad emotions and over the temptations that *you* will face.

Now let me give you the background of my text. Jesus and His disciples had their last supper together. That was an emotional experience. Then they left the upper room and headed toward the Eastern (or Golden) gate to leave the city of Jerusalem. The moon was full and its silvery light illuminated the way to Gethsemane. They crossed the Kidron brook which flowed with the blood of animals sacrificed in the nearby temple, and Jesus must have thought how His own blood would pour on the ground before another day ended. Somewhere near the foot of the Mount of Olives was a grove of olive trees called Gethsemane, in all probability meaning “oil-press.” Jesus frequently went there (John 18:2) when He came to Jerusalem. It was probably surrounded by a hedge fence. He evidently had most of His disciples stay just inside the entrance of the Garden,¹ while He, Peter, James, and John went further into the garden. In this garden a tremendous emotional struggle took place that ultimately led to our salvation.

So from the example of Jesus I want to share with you how to handle the deep emotions, major decisions and temptations that you will face in life. The first point I want to share with you is this:

I. JESUS EXPERIENCED SORROW AND TEMPTATION

The most distressing time in the life of Jesus was not when He was tempted by Satan in the wilderness after a 40 day fast. It was not even when they whipped His back 39 times or more. Probably the most difficult time of His earthly life was that evening when Jesus went into the Garden of Gethsemane. God knows no pain, agony, or suffering. But when He became a man, He experienced those things on our behalf, especially in Gethsemane.

Note with me how His sorrow was:

¹ Wilkins believes that the garden may have been near a cave on the hillside of the Mount of olives, and the eight disciples could have sought shelter in the cave while Jesus and the 3 went their way (p.840).

A. Expressed - Matthew, Mark, and Luke use different words to describe the agony and grief of Jesus at this time. Matthew says in the last of v.37, He “begin to be sorrowful and deeply distressed.” He was very sorrowful or grief stricken (*lupeo*). And the word “distressed” (*ademoneo*) means to be in anxiety, distressed, troubled.² Mark also used that word, but included a word (*ekthambeo*) that means to be alarmed, be distressed. Fully realizing what He was about to face, we can certainly understand how Jesus could have been alarmed, distressed, sad, and even downright depressed.³

V.38 gives Jesus own words to describe how He felt at that moment. The word translated “exceedingly sorrowful” (*perilupos*) is an intensification of the word translated “sorrowful” in v.37. But the intensifying preposition gives it the meaning of “to encircle with sorrow,” or to be “overwhelmed with grief.” He was engulfed in sadness. In fact, it was further described as “even to death.” All of these expressions are quite sufficient to show that the grief of the Savior was of the most extraordinary character. Never had He faced such emotion before. Think of the lowest time in your life and multiply it, and you will get a feel for what Christ was going through.

The Scriptures teach that Jesus never sinned (2 Cor. 5:21). So we may conclude that it is not a sin to experience sorrow, grief, and even the emotion of being down and depressed. How you *respond* to such emotions will determine whether or not you sin. Jesus did not *stay* depressed. As we shall see, He did something about it through prayer, faith in God, and the surrender of His will. We need to follow His example.

B. The Causes – Every effect has a cause. What could have caused such sorrow and distress? Was Jesus responding this way because of a natural shrinking away from the intense physical suffering He knew He would face? (cf. 20:22-23, 28; 26:27). Was His soul tormented at the prospect of impending death? The human nature of Jesus may have been troubled to some degree about suffering and death, especially the death of a cross. Any man would shrink from the cross, for it was a dreadful way to be executed. It was a slow, painful, and shameful death. Furthermore, He knew that He would face a terrible scourging. But that certainly would not explain the *intensity* of anguish that Jesus experienced. After all, we may reverently point out that many a martyr of Christ has faced suffering and death with greater calmness, yet only with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Of course, there *was* even more to face besides physical suffering. He would suffer emotionally. He could see the speedy coming of the traitor Judas (v.46). How that must have grieved His heart! He knew He would be forsaken by all of His own disciples. Peter would deny Him (v.34). He knew He would be rejected by His own people, the Jews. He knew the prophecy of Isa. 53, “He was despised and rejected of men.” He knew He would face the utter shame and rejection of the mock-trials, the spitings and beatings. He knew of the crown of thorns the Gentile soldiers would mockingly put on His brow. He knew of the shame of having His clothes taken off, and lifted up on a cross as a spectacle for hundreds, even thousands to see.

Even still, there must be more to it than that. You see, what lay before Him was not merely physical suffering and death, but the death which was to atone for a world’s sin. He knew the prophecy of Isaiah 53, that “The Lord would lay on Him the iniquity of us all.” Not only was He to bear our sin, but in some sense, He was to “be made sin for us” (2 Cor. 5:21). Christ would suffer as though He were a vile sinner. He would be regarded in the eyes of God as a murderer, a

² Some maintain that *ademoneo* has a root meaning of distraction, separation, and thus loneliness.

³ Luke used the word “agony” to describe the experience of our Lord. That Greek word describes an intense struggle or conflict, as in the Greek athletic games.

thief, an adulterer, a liar, and much more as He bore our sin. He knew that He would bear the curse of sin (Gal. 3:13). How His holy, perfect nature must have been shocked and repulsed at such close association with sin and iniquity! We cannot even imagine the horror He felt as He contemplated sin being placed upon Him. He knew that He would bear the penalty of our sin, bearing our guilt and death, suffering the holy wrath of God against sin, especially during those three hours of darkness. Furthermore, He would even be forsaken of God. He would soon cry from the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” As perfect Man, He felt the awful burden of sin, and His holy soul was repelled by it. Yet as the Son of God, He knew that this was His mission in the world. He knew that souls could only be saved by His own suffering and death. He knew that He would have to disarm death by receiving its dagger into His own heart.

Beloved friends, if you can picture in your mind’s eye the terrible incidents of the hounding through the streets of Jerusalem, the nailing to the cross, the fever, the thirst, and above all, the forsaking of His God while He bore our sin, you should not marvel that He began to be very distressed and emotionally down. In fact, Heb. 5:7 can be interpreted to mean that the agony and distress was so great, that only prayer and the strengthening of the angel (Luke 22:43) prevented a premature death! (cf. v.38 “sorrowful even unto death.”) Furthermore, the struggle was so great, that according to Luke, his sweat was falling audibly and heavily like blood-drops from a wound.⁴

Oh, when you consider how greatly Jesus suffered for us, you know that He must love us greatly. Shouldn’t we respond with great love for Him?

II. JESUS SHOWED US HOW TO BATTLE SUCH EMOTIONS & TEMPTATION

In human weakness Jesus was being tempted to forego the cross. He was facing the greatest difficulty of His life. Many believe that this temptation to not drink this cup of suffering came from Satan.⁵ Yet no gospel account explicitly states his involvement in Gethsemane. I believe His humanity was enough of an explanation for His distress and desire to avoid what lay ahead.

So the very reason He went to the Garden that night was because He sought its refuge in a time of trouble. What do you do when you face trouble? You should do what Jesus did. After all, there is a Garden of Gethsemane in all our lives. Perhaps you’re experiencing agonizing trials and temptations right now. Our text gives 3 ways that we are to deal with sorrow and temptation. First:

A. Seek the Support of Fellow Believers - Notice that Jesus selected the same three intimate disciples to be near Him during His agony. In v.38 He confided in them regarding His sorrow of heart. He also charged them saying, “Stay here and watch with Me.” In that last contest His human soul craved for the presence of those who stood nearest Him and loved Him best. He longed for the comfort of knowing that at least there were a few who cared enough to watch with Him, and hopefully pray as well.

Even so, when you go through difficulties and trouble, do not try to go alone. If Jesus sought the comfort of companionship during trouble, how much more do we need such

⁴ Many commentators assume that Christ sweat literal blood, but the text does not actually say that.

⁵ However, it is clear that Satan was out to kill Jesus through the betrayal of Judas & the plot of the Israelite leaders. Why would he work against his own purposes?

companionship? Don't face your troubles alone! Our social nature should cause us to reach out to others for strength, help, and prayer support. Call upon family members who are strong in the faith. Call upon your deacon, S.S. teacher, or pastor to hear your concerns and pray with you.

Furthermore, when you are called upon to be a companion to someone in their time of trouble, I hope you will do better than Peter, James, and John did! They turned out to be poor companions for Jesus during His distress. Instead of surrounding Jesus with prayer they kept falling asleep! (vv.40, 43, 45). Sure it was late, and they were naturally exhausted from a busy, emotionally draining week. But if weariness had weighed down their eyelids, love should have kept them open. Gal. 6:2 says, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." They should have been praying for their Lord. Let us all resolve to be better companions in time of trouble!

B. Watch Out for Temptation - Christ was facing temptation. And I believe that it is during times of sadness and depression that you are very vulnerable to temptation. One time I read that sixty percent of the people who resume bad habits do so when they feel angry, anxious, depressed, bored or lonely. So watch out for the danger of temptation during times of emotion. Well, the disciples were going through a time of sadness as well (Lk. 22:45). So Jesus warned His disciples of temptation they would face. They would be tempted to be untrue to Him. Peter would be tempted to deny Christ. He and the other two needed to watch out for the temptation to sleep at a time they were to watch and pray. So Jesus said in v.41, "Watch and pray.... The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." "Flesh" in this case refers to our frail and needy human nature. Jesus experienced the weakness of His own human nature. Surely you know of the weakness of human nature. That is why we must be watchful for temptation.

Now what does it mean to watch? This means to be discerning of the danger of temptation. In fact, Jesus explicitly said in v.41, "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation." Then take appropriate action to protect oneself against such danger. Thus, Jesus is speaking primarily of spiritual dangers. My friend, this world is full of spiritual dangers. The Bible says that Satan is like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. If you do not maintain a watchful attitude, you can be deceived by Satan and the world. Then, you can easily yield to temptation.

The world is also full of physical dangers. When I am driving, I try to stay alert to the dangers I could face on the road. Many are concerned of the danger of the coronavirus, and they take precautions.

When was the last time you yielded to temptation? Were you being watchful at the time? Listen, one way to avoid temptation is to stay alert to it. You need to understand that vigilance is the price of victory.

Now being watchful is not enough. Since our flesh is weak, we may give in to temptation even when we recognize it for what it is. We also need strength to resist the temptation, or deliverance from the temptation. So we need to take a third step:

C. Pray! – Indeed, in v.41 Jesus not only commanded them to watch, but also to pray. Dear friends, when we are tempted and when we face difficulty, the best weapon is prayer. That's exactly what Jesus did. Three times He prayed and found the strength He needed to resist temptation and do the will of God (vv.39, 42, 44). And with such a significant crisis before them, the disciples should have followed the example of Jesus and prayed. They needed to pray, because danger was around the corner. But they perceived themselves as invincible, (v.33),

confusing their good intentions for power. As a result, they didn't pray, and they soon yielded to temptation. But the key to overcoming temptation is not smug *self*-confidence, but dependence on God through prayer.

Watching for temptation and turning to God in prayer go hand in hand. As someone said, "Watching sights the enemy; praying fights the enemy." The scout for the army doesn't engage in battle with the enemy once he finds them; that would be idiotic. Instead, he returns to tell the commander what he's learned, and then the commander leads the troops into battle. No Christian can be victorious in fighting Satan by himself; he must report to the Commander. Jesus Himself sought out our Heavenly Father for divine strength.

Now I want to show you 6 characteristics of prayer that I see from the example of Jesus. You may want to write these down. First:

1. Prayer Should Be Humble - Instead of standing or even kneeling, v.39 indicates that Jesus fell upon His face, prostrate before God in helpless appeal. Amazing! A King on His face! Humility gives us good foot-hold in prayer.

2. Prayer Should Be Filial – What I mean by that is that prayer should be as a child to a loving Father. In v.39 Matthew describes Jesus as saying, "O my Father." Though many times Jesus *referred* to God as "my Father," this is the only incident as recorded in the gospels, when He *addressed* God with the personal pronoun "My." Usually it is simply "Father" or "Our Father." In the midst of all the sorrow, His sense of relation was unbroken.

Christian, when you pray, plead as a child to a loving Father. You are not a mere slave with no hope of favor or access to the Lord of the universe. When I think of how much I love my wife, my sons, and my granddaughters, even so I know that God loves His children, and is interested in hearing and granting our prayers. And that leads to the next element of prayer:

3. Prayer Should Include Petition - Now notice the request that Jesus lifts up to His Father. Basically, He was requesting in v.39 that this cup pass from Him. Jesus refers to a cup that He otherwise must drink. In the idiom of the OT, "drinking a cup," i.e. its contents, means fully undergoing this or that experience, whether favorable (Psa. 16:5; 23:5; 116:18; Jer. 16:7) or, in this case, unfavorable (Psa. 11:6; 75:8; Isa. 51:17, 22; Jer. 25:15, 17, 28; 49:12; etc.). Cf. also Mt. 20:22; Rev. 14:10; 16:10; 17:4; 18:6. The cup of suffering and wrath awaited Him. His manhood would not have been like ours if He had not shrunk back from such a "cup." But His shrinking does not reach the point of absolutely and unconditionally asking that the cup might pass. When Jesus says, "If it is possible," He is not speaking of the physical realm, for with God all things are possible in that realm. But He was speaking of the moral realm; if it is morally and spiritually possible. Was there any way man could be saved and the righteousness of God satisfied apart from the cross? Could He remain in the will of God some other way? If so, He asked that the cup would pass from Him.

So feel free to bring your requests to God. Phil. 4:6 says, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, let your requests be made known unto God." We should feel free to bring our petitions to God in prayer. James 1:5 says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach...." Ask! Boldly bring your requests to God. He will not reproach you for asking.

4. Prayer Should Be Persevering - He prayed three times, using similar words each time. After the first and even second time, Jesus must not have felt that He had complete victory over the spiritual struggle He was facing, so He kept praying until He did. The last of v.40 seems to indicated that Jesus prayed about an hour. When was the last time you prayed that long?

My friend, when you face temptation, don't stop when you *think* you have victory, but keep praying until you are *sure* you have victory. Don't be content until you prevail over temptation and the enemy through prayer.

5. Prayer Should Be Earnest - The earnestness of His prayer is obvious and needs no proof, though it is explicitly stated in Lk. 22:44. Casual prayer is not enough. James 5:16 says, "The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." If you really want to get things done in prayer, you need to put your heart, soul, mind, and strength into your prayer.

6. Prayer Should Be According to the Will of God - Notice that Jesus renounced His own will 3 times (vv.39c; 42b; 44b) even as He expressed His revulsion against the cup of God's wrath. This reveals the completely sinless nature of the prayer. The main clause in v.39, "let this cup pass from Me," is introduced by the subordinate clause, "if it is possible." But the words, "nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" explains what Christ means by "if it be possible." (Cf. 1 Jn. 5:14-15)

Notice that the 2nd prayer is even more rooted in acquiescence than the first. The main clause is no longer, "Let this cup be spared me," but "Your will be done." Unless God's will can be accomplished with the cup being withdrawn, then He does not wish for the cup to be withdrawn. Here, He is totally and completely yielding to the will of God in His prayer, and that's the way it should be.

Even so, we need to offer our petitions with the understanding that we want God to grant our requests only if they are consistent with God's will. Choosing to follow our own will instead of God's is the ruinous sin of God's fallen creatures. In Isa. 14 we read the arrogant "I will's of Satan's rebellion against God. The root of sin is self-will. We never come to the place of full usefulness as a Christian until we have a "Gethsemane" where our self-will is broken, and we humbly say, "Lord, not as I will." Jesus taught that we are to deny self (Mt. 16:24) before we can follow Him. How would you characterize your commitment to your Father's will?

One time a family member became ill and as his condition worsened, we thought that hospitalization would be necessary. Of course, Cheryl and I prayed earnestly for his healing. But I reached a point where I was reminded of the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3. When the king demanded that they bow and worship the image, or be cast into the fiery furnace, they said, "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace... But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up" (vv.17-18). They believed that God would answer their prayer for deliverance, but they also acknowledged that it may not be God's will. Either way, they would fully submit to the will of God. Even so, I reached the point in my prayers for his healing that I could also pray, "But if not," I will still serve You, and love you with all my heart. That was 14 years ago and I have kept that commitment.

How about you? Are you willing to pray according to God's will, even if the outcome is not what you want? After all, God's will is best in the long run. His will is "good, acceptable, and perfect" (Rom. 12:2b).

Well, last of all, when you face sorrow and temptation:

III. JESUS SHOWS US THAT VICTORY IS POSSIBLE!

When Jesus came out of the Garden, He had a completely different frame of mind. Something happened in that garden that changed His frame of mind. He is no longer distressed and sorrowful. He did not yield to temptation to flee. He struggled against temptation and

prevailed. Christ was now in perfect harmony with the will of God, calmly prepared to move toward the cross.

Notice the victory seen beginning in v.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.’” Christ came forth triumphant after 3 battles in prayer. No longer did He bid His disciples to watch and pray with Him. They can sleep on. Christ prayed His way to perfect calm, which is always the companion of perfect self-surrender and trust in God.

But the sleep turns out to be very brief. Doubtless a little later He heard the voices of the mob, saw the lanterns approaching amid the trees, so in v.46 Jesus calls them to rise, and join Him in meeting the betrayer. Here we see another aspect of His victory. He does not run away into the darkness, seeking some hiding place, which would have been easy to obtain. But He boldly, bravely and courageously goes and joins the other 8 disciples to await Judas and the band of soldiers. These last words in Gethsemane throb with the Son’s willingness to yield Himself up, and to drink the cup which the Father had given Him.

The events that followed confirmed the victory that Jesus gained in the Garden. He willingly allowed Himself to be bound by the soldiers. His hands were not really bound by those chains or ropes, but by His love for you and for me. And when they arrested Him, Jesus rebuked Peter for trying to resist with the sword (vv.51-53), explaining that only by submitting to their evil plans would prophecy be fulfilled (v.54). Then as Jesus faced each mock trial, and as He faced Pilate Himself, He maintained an utter calmness, strangely unwilling to defend Himself against their false charges. Not once did their terrible sin against Him cause Him to respond in like manner. Instead, He even prayed from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” How did Jesus have such strength as He faced the most terrible trial any man has ever faced? There is only one answer: Gethsemane. What victory Jesus gained in that Garden! Jesus did not go to the Garden to hide from the cross; He went to the Garden to get the strength to face the cross for you and for me!

One morning a church organist placed his hands on the keys of the organ and began to play. But there was no sound. They skipped the prelude and went on to the morning prayer. In the mean time, the janitor realized what was going on, and he knew what the problem was. He hooked up the power to the organ, then slipped a note to the organist that read, “After the prayer, the power will be on.” That is the way it is spiritually. Jesus prayed and found strength to go to the Cross.

We, too, need to have our own Gethsemane experience. If we do, we will find strength to face the difficulties and temptations of life.

Conclusion: So the next time you face a heavy trial that brings sorrow to your heart, remember what Jesus did. Seek the prayer support of fellow believers. Watch out for temptation. And seek the Lord in prayer. Then, you will also have the victory over sorrow and temptation. If you seek the Lord in prayer, God will give you the strength and comfort you need. Such a loving relationship with God the Father was made possible because Jesus was willing to go to the Cross for you and for me.

Now Jesus gained the victory when He yielded fully to the will of God. What is God’s will for your life this morning? 1 Tim. 2:4 says that God wills for all men to be saved, and to come to a knowledge of the truth. Have you surrendered to the will of God for your life? Have you been saved? Stop fighting God’s will for your life. Yield to His loving will. I know that

repenting of your sins and giving your life to Christ publicly is not easy. But the time is now for your Gethsemane. Will you say to God, “Not my will, but yours be done!” Will you be victorious, or will you allow Satan to have the victory over your life?

Sources: Ronald A. Beers, ed., *Life Application Study Bible* (Tyndale House & Zondervan, 1991); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2006; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973); John MacArthur, Jr., *Jesus on Trial: Matthew 26:31-75* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1988); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture, Vol 6* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); John Phillips, *Exploring The Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Loyal: Matthew* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1980); Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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