

# AGONY IN THE GARDEN

Matthew 26:36-44

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Some of you are aware, I'm sure, that a debate is currently underway in evangelical circles regarding Jesus' teaching on hell and the enormity of God's wrath. A new book is out there, written by Rob Bell, a popular pastor from Grand Rapids, Michigan, who *claims* to be evangelical (even though he holds no evangelical convictions and it's quite clear that he does not regard the Bible as any kind of authority). And he's questioning whether hell really exists. He suggests that if in the final judgment God condemns unbelievers by sending them into everlasting punishment, then God is not truly good.

That book is currently number 2 in its category on the New York Times bestseller list. It was the subject of a special session last week at The Gospel Coalition conference in Chicago, and it evidently has lots of Christians confused about the reality of hell, the eternality of punishment for the reprobate, the necessity of conscious faith in Christ, the severity of divine wrath, the principle of substitutionary atonement, and the necessity of Christ's death as a payment of sin on our behalf. Those are all truths Rob Bell questions or denies, and by enticing others to doubt or disbelieve those things, he has effect renounced the very heart of gospel truth and is turning people away from the truth of Christ.

John MacArthur is currently writing a series about this on the Grace to You blog, and I've been thinking about it a lot as I have read those articles this week and sat in on the discussions about it at The Gospel Coalition.

I've also been thinking about the significance of this week, starting with Palm Sunday today and culminating in Resurrection Sunday next week. And in the midst of that reflection, it occurred to me that Jesus' agony in the garden on the night of His betrayal is one of the most vivid proofs we have that God's wrath is as real and as severe as His righteousness is perfect. This episode also gives graphic evidence that the punishment for our sin is unbearable in its infinite horror, and that God's judgment is to be feared in the most real and profound sense of holy terror. If you

don't tremble with alarm at the thought of God's wrath, then you haven't contemplated it carefully enough.

This makes a perfect passage to study on the Sunday before we celebrate Christ's resurrection, so I want to take you there this morning: Matthew 26:36-44.

Here is a passage that is very difficult to absorb. I frankly think it is probably the single most difficult passage in all the gospels. Of course, this is the passage where Jesus prays in Gethsemane on the eve of the crucifixion, and He pleads with the Father to let the cup pass from him. It's not an easy text to absorb or explain.

I first began to look carefully at this vignette from the life of Christ more than a decade ago. It was my great privilege to edit the notes on the synoptic gospels for the MacArthur Study Bible, and I vividly remember working my way through the Matthew notes until I got to this passage. In fact, let me read you a portion of the note on Matthew 26:39 from the Study Bible. In verse 38, Jesus tells the disciples, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death." Why was Christ's soul in such agony? John MacArthur writes: "*The next day Christ would 'bear the sins of many' . . . and the fullness of divine wrath would fall on Him. . . . This was the price of the sin He bore, and He paid it in full.*" I remember that I had to stop when I read that, and try to take it in. That truth stuck in my mind and I thought about it for days. To be honest, I've never really fully come to grips with everything it means--and I doubt I ever will in this life--perhaps not even in eternity. This is a *huge* Idea.

Then about a year later, I returned to the gospel of Matthew again when I edited John MacArthur's book on the crucifixion, titled *The Murder of Jesus*.

Both times, I was brought face to face with this passage and forced into a very profitable in-depth study of this text. This is an important passage to understand, and it has profound implications for you and me in our own prayer lives. More than any other passage I know, this passage helps us see exactly what it was that Christ accomplished on the cross. And more than any other passage I know, this one gives us a clear perspective on the humanity of Christ and the implications of that truth. People who wonder if the temptations of Christ were *real* temptations need to study this passage. If you've ever wondered whether it's literally true that Jesus has fully experienced the feeling of our infirmities--

you need to lay hold of the agony described in this passage of Scripture.

By now you should have turned to Matthew 26. We'll be dealing with verses 36-44. But first let me quickly review the context for you.

This is the night of Jesus' betrayal. Earlier this same evening, Jesus had celebrated Passover with the disciples in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. The gospel of John devotes five chapters-- chapters 13 through 17--to giving a detailed account of what happened that evening in the upper room. This whole day-- Thursday of Passion week--is the most thoroughly documented day of Jesus' life. And the event we're looking at this morning occurred at the end of that fateful day, after the eating of the Passover, after Jesus spent that final evening with His disciples.

John 18:1 says, "He went out with his disciples across the Kidron Valley, where there was a garden." Matthew 26:36 says the name of the garden was *Gethsemane*, which literally means "oil press." It was a secluded place, directly opposite the eastern gate of the Temple, where there was a grove of olive trees. I have visited that very spot, and there are still ancient olive trees there to this day, some of them more than 2,000 years old. This was a garden where Jesus often met to pray with His disciples. In fact, His pattern of going there was so predictable that this was how Judas knew exactly when and where to bring the Roman troops to arrest Jesus. John 18:2 tells us, "Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, for Jesus *often* met there with his disciples."

This particular night Christ was drawn to that garden to pray through the most difficult struggle He ever waged. He *knew* He was going to be betrayed. He had already identified Judas as the traitor, proving that He was sovereignly in control of everything that was happening to Him. He knew when He went into that garden that he would be arrested before He left. None of this took Jesus by surprise. In fact, I want you to see how clearly Jesus foresaw what would come to pass.

Look, for example, at verse 18 (Matthew 26): Earlier that afternoon, when it was time to prepare for the Passover meal, He told them, "My time is at hand." The hour of His death had finally arrived, and Jesus knew it. Then when Judas showed up with the soldiers to arrest Him, Jesus already knew they were coming. John 18:4 says, "Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came

forward [toward this band of soldiers] and said to them, 'Whom do you seek?'" He willingly surrendered to them. Many times in the past He had sovereignly evaded plots and crowds of people who wanted to kill Him, and He could have done so now. In fact, He said to Peter on this very occasion (Matthew 26:53-54): "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?"

It was His hour now, the time foreordained by God.

Jesus understood fully what His dying would entail. He knew all the *pain* and *agony* and *taunting* and *humiliation* He would have to bear, but He was nonetheless prepared to submit Himself completely.

The passage we are looking at this morning is about that submission. It describes how He consciously and deliberately submitted Himself to all the horrors of the cross--and it gives us some insight into what that entailed. Despite the agony He felt and the sense of unbearable dread that tormented His mind, He consciously and rationally surrendered His human will to the will of God the father, and this is the process by which He did that. Let me read the passage, Matthew 26:36-44:

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.

As I said, the great lesson of this passage is Jesus' *submission*. Here we see in microcosm the whole process described in Philippians 2:6-8, which tells us that Christ, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." The Matthew 26 prayer in Gethsemane gives us a window into the soul and the heart of Christ, and it reveals what a supreme sacrifice it was for Him to die on our behalf.

Here we see that Christ was willing to submit Himself to *the wrath of a righteous God*; He was willing to submit Himself to *the weakness of human flesh*; and He was willing to submit Himself to *the will of a loving Father*. And this morning I want to look at those three aspects of His humiliation, because we see all three in clear focus here in the garden. (I'll reiterate the three points as we go):

#### 1. HE WAS WILLING TO SUBMIT HIMSELF TO THE WRATH OF A RIGHTEOUS GOD.

Before I really began to understand this prayer of Christ, I often wondered about it. What, exactly, was it that Jesus was praying for? Verse 39: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." This is, as I said, one of the most remarkable and difficult passages in all of Scripture. It is not easy to interpret. But if we look at it biblically, the meaning is clear.

Here's what makes it so difficult. These are some of the questions that come to mind when we read this text: What, precisely, is the cup Christ prays to let pass?

Our normal inclination is to think of it as the pain of crucifixion. We've already seen that Christ knew every detail of what He was about to undergo. He understood what the cross

entailed by way of pain and suffering. It would have been perfectly natural for Him to want to avoid it.

Except for one thing. This is precisely what Christ had come into the world to do. John 12:27 describes another prayer that Jesus prayed near the end of His public ministry. With a crowd of people standing by, He prayed: "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour."

Dying was the very purpose for which Christ came into the world. His crucifixion was no accident. He was no martyr. He said this in John 10:17-18: "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father." So the death of Christ was an act of obedience to the Father, planned by the Godhead in eternity past, and agreed to by Christ before He ever came to earth.

This is exactly what we are taught in Hebrews 10:4-7:

4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

5 Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me;

6 in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.

7 Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'

In other words, Christ was incarnated as a man precisely so that He could die. This Hebrews passage teaches that His death was *the kind of atonement that the blood of bulls and goats could not provide*, and it was for this very cause that He had come into the world. This is the very thing His body was prepared for. It's a little hard to imagine that he would be having second thoughts or trying to back out at this point.

Notice that Christ's trauma right here in the garden had taken Him to the very brink of death. Remember, in verse 38 He says, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death." Luke 22:44 says, "And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground." This was unspeakable agony. I have heard certain Bible teachers suggest

that the "cup" Christ prayed for relief from was the threat of a premature death that night in the garden. According to them, He was praying that the plan of redemption might not be derailed by His dying before He reached the cross. And according to them, God answered Jesus' prayer so that he didn't have to drink the cup. Because the cup he was praying to be removed was a premature death.

However, that interpretation seems contrived. It doesn't really seem like that is what this passage is teaching. In fact, notice what Jesus says in John 18:11 when the soldiers come to arrest Him. Peter takes out his sword and whacks off a guy's ear, and Jesus says, "Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?"

So the cup did *not* pass after all. After this prayer, Christ had His answer, and His own words reflect the fact that the cup was something the Father *did* give the Son to drink after all. He expressly speaks of "the cup that the Father has given me."

I think there's a clear *biblical* explanation of what Jesus was speaking of when He asked for the cup to pass. It was not the cross in general. It was not the physical pain, or the humiliation. It was not the horrible thirst, or the torture of having nails driven through His body, or the disgrace of being spat upon or beaten. All of those were *secondary*. Those things were passing, temporal, relatively insignificant sufferings compared to the cup of woe that prompted this kind of dread in the soul Jesus of Christ. Remember that in Matthew 10:28, Jesus said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." Christ *Himself* was certainly not fearful of what mere men could do to Him.

But I believe this is all very clear: What Jesus dreaded most about the cross--the cup which he asks to be delivered from if possible--was the outpouring of divine wrath that He would have to endure.

How do I know that? Well, His terminology is significant. The *cup* is a well-known Old Testament symbol of divine wrath against sin. Isaiah 51:17 says, "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."

Jeremiah 25:15-18 says,

Thus the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: "Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it.

16 They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them."

17 So I took the cup from the LORD's hand, and made all the nations to whom the LORD sent me drink it:

18 Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, its kings and officials, to make them a desolation and a waste, a hissing and a curse, as at this day.

And verses 27-28 say this:

"Then you shall say to them, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: *Drink, be drunk and vomit, fall and rise no more, because of the sword that I am sending among you.*'

28 "And if they refuse to accept the cup from your hand to drink, then you shall say to them, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts: *You must drink!*'

So the cup symbolizes a judgment that God forces the wicked to drink. They drink until they become drunk, and sick, and then they vomit. (The KJV says they "spue." I like that because it's more forceful, and it reflects in a graphic way the intensity of the cup of judgment.) It is as if God says to sinner, "You like sin?" Fine. Drink your fill. And he makes them keep drinking of the consequences of their own sin, so that the very thing they sought after becomes the judgment he force-feeds them, and the thing they loved becomes something that makes them sick, and ultimately destroys them.

You'll also find the imagery of a cup used as judgment in Lamentations 4:21-22; Ezekiel 23:31-34; and Habakkuk 2:16. So this is a very common Old Testament symbol.

And the meaning of this would be clear to anyone who knew the Old Testament Scriptures. When Christ prayed that if possible the *cup* might pass from Him, it was the cup of divine judgment that he spoke of. I do not believe for a moment that Christ feared the earthly pain of crucifixion. I do not think He trembled at the prospect of what men could do to Him. I don't think there was one ounce of the fear of man in Him. But He knew that the next day He would "bear the sins of many" (Hebrews 9:28)--and the fullness of divine wrath would fall on Him. In some mysterious way that our human minds could never fathom, God the father would turn His



face from Christ the Son, and Christ would bear the full brunt of the divine fury against sin.

Isaiah 53:10-11 says, "Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; *he has put him to grief*; when his soul [the soul of Christ] makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities." So when Christ hung on the cross, he was bearing the sins of His people. Second Corinthians 5:21 explains the cross in a similar way: "He made him to be sin [for us] who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." In other words, on the cross, God imputed our sin to Christ and then punished Him for it.

That was the price of the sin that Christ bore, and He paid it in full. Remember the cry of anguish in Matthew 27:46? "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That reflects the extreme bitterness of the cup He was given. No wonder he sought if possible to have the cup pass from Him.

Now, someone says, "Didn't Jesus already know that there was no way for this cup to pass? *Of course He knew that*. So why does He pray for it here? If Christ already knew that the cross was unavoidable, why does he pray this prayer in Gethsemane? I can think of several answers to that question, and it moves us to our second point. Not only was Christ willing to submit Himself to the wrath of God--

## 2. HE WAS WILLING TO SUBMIT HIMSELF TO THE WEAKNESS OF HUMAN FLESH.

When Christ was incarnated into human flesh, he took on Himself all the natural weaknesses of humanity--except for those that are inherently sinful. Hebrews 4:15 says, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."

Every infirmity of human nature, except for sin itself, He shared. He grew weary; He grew hungry; He felt pain; and here in the Garden, He experienced the deepest kind of *sorrow*, and *dread*, and *troubling of His soul*. I keep going back to verse 38: "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death." This prayer is an outpouring of

those human feelings. It shows us the *humanity* of Christ as clearly as anything in Scripture.

Now listen carefully: You and I have a sinful nature. We were born with a bent towards evil. We struggle with lust, and covetousness, and all kinds of evil desires. Jesus had none of those evil desires. The weaknesses we see on display here are not *sinful* weaknesses, but normal human desires. There would be something seriously wrong if Christ had a masochistic love of suffering. There would be something *inhuman* about Christ if he did not look forward to the cross with a deep uneasiness and dread of what was to come. This is not a craven fear; it is the same dread and foreboding that any of us feel when we know we are about to undergo something extremely painful. But in Jesus' case, that dread is infinitely magnified, because of the nature of what He faced, and because He understood full well all that was involved in the outpouring of God's wrath.

Proverbs 19:10 says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight." Even Christ in the perfection of His eternal wisdom feared God. And we see the most vivid evidence of that fear in the agony He suffered in the Garden. Furthermore, because His knowledge of the Holy One--His own Father--was superior to any other human who has ever lived, His fear of God's wrath was more perfect and more intense than any holy fear you or I have ever felt. Here is living proof that when Scripture calls for the fear of God, it's not merely talking about some antiseptic brand of high-church "reverence"; it's telling us the fear of God should be true fear, causing a holy terror, righteous dread, and sanctified trembling. That's what we see in Christ, and that is an appropriate response for any man or woman thinking about facing God in His righteousness.

Incidentally, nowhere does the Bible ever declare that Jesus' deity makes Him something *more* than a man, or something *other* than human. Scripture never allows the divine nature of Christ to overshadow or diminish the human nature. On the contrary, everything Scripture says about Christ's role as our Savior depends on the fact that He is fully and completely a man.

First Timothy 2:5 makes this as clear as it can possibly be: "There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, *the man Christ Jesus*." Hebrews 2:17 also underscores the essential truth of Jesus' humanity: "He *had* to be made like his

brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people."

Jesus was not merely playing at being human. He was human in the fullest sense. He took on *all* our infirmities except for our sin. And at this moment in the garden, his humanity manifest itself as clearly as at any time ever in His ministry. He was struggling with many of the same things we struggle with daily; horror at the prospect of what God wanted Him to do; consternation over the anticipation of what that would cost Him; and a very real desire to avoid it all if there was any possible way.

Those desires, normal human desires, not sinful ones, *had* to be consciously, deliberately surrendered to the will of God. The desires themselves were not sinful. But they would have been sinful if He insisted on fulfilling those human preferences at the expense of the Father's will. Jesus knew this, and His entire life was lived with this sort of premeditated, voluntary submission to the Father's will. He said, "He who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him." (John 8:29); "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work." (John 4:34); "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 5:30); "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38).

So this prayer is an honest expression of the human feelings of Christ. He sincerely dreaded the prospect of the Father's wrath, and wished to avoid it if there were any possible way.

Still, someone might ask, why does He pray this particular prayer in the garden? He had already agreed to do the Father's will. Surely He knew this was unavoidable. Weren't these issues He had settled in His heart long before?

In a way, yes. But now facing the prospect of what would happen, He felt the burden in a way He had never felt it before: All the weight of human sorrow, and human apprehensions, and human emotions were welling up in Him as He stood on the threshold of taking up His cross.

I also think there's a second reason He prayed this prayer. Of course He knew there was no possible way to avoid the outpouring of wrath. I am certain there was no real question in His mind

about whether these things were avoidable. And I think he was praying this prayer for *Peter's* sake. Let me explain what I mean.

There's an amazing statement in the prayer Jesus prayed at the raising of Lazarus. Just before Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he prayed aloud, and His prayer on that occasion is recorded in John 11:41-42. Here's what He said: "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, *but I said this on account of the people standing around*, that they may believe that you sent me." A few minutes ago I read you John 12:27-8, where Jesus said, "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Scripture says immediately after that "Then a voice came from heaven: 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'" And then Jesus says this about that voice from heaven--John 12:30: "This voice has come for your sake, not mine."

Frequently, we see Jesus praying aloud for the sake of those listening. And I believe this prayer in the garden was prayed aloud primarily for Peter's sake, and for the sake of the other apostles. Notice in verse 37 that Jesus had specifically taken Peter, James, and John with him into the garden. He asked them to wait nearby and watch with Him. According to Luke 22:31, He knew that Satan had solicited permission from God to sift Peter like wheat. Jesus' prayer was a model for Peter. Peter could have learned a lot from listening to Jesus pray.

But look what happened. Matthew 26:40--they fell asleep. And Jesus had to waken them and urge them to stay awake with Him. He says to Peter: "So, could you not watch with me one hour?"

Now look at what he says to Peter (v. 41): "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

The flesh is weak. Jesus knew this very well from firsthand experience. At this precise moment, he was battling the infirmities of His own flesh--again, these were not sinful infirmities, but normal human passions which, if not subjugated to the divine will, can lead us into sin.

Peter sinned because he slept. It's no sin to sleep, but at this moment, Christ had given him work to do. He was supposed to be awake and watching and praying with Christ. Peter's fatigue, not sinful in itself, needed to be submitted to the will of God. Peter's

*spirit* was certainly willing--look back at verse 33. Peter had promised Christ that even if everyone else abandoned Him, he would never fall away. Then Christ warned him about what was going to happen. But Peter was overconfident. Ultimately he failed because of the weakness of his flesh. I am convinced that if he had followed Christ's example here in the garden, and prayed for the strength to endure, submitted his will to the Father's will, he never would have failed.

And this is my third point this morning. We see in this prayer of Christ's that:

### 3. HE WAS WILLING TO SUBMIT HIMSELF TO THE WILL OF A LOVING FATHER

Look at verse 39 again: "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.'" And verse 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.'"

Now, we know that Christ *did* drink the full cup of the wrath of God. Someone will ask, "Does this mean that God did not answer Jesus' prayer?" No, God answered His prayer.

"But does it mean He didn't give Him what He asked for?" Look again: Christ prays (v. 39), "*if it be possible*, let this cup pass from me," and then He adds this qualifier to the end: "nevertheless not as I will, but as you will." This is the operative phrase of Jesus' prayer. This is His prayer request (v. 42): "your will be done." And God answered that request with an emphatic yes.

Christ's prayer was *not* for the cup to pass *at any cost*. He asked to be relieved of the cup *only if there were some other way to accomplish the plan of God*. God's response to this prayer proves definitively *that there was no possible way to achieve the redemption of sinners short of the sacrifice of His own Son*. God did not send Christ to die frivolously. If there had been another way, He would have done it. But there was no other way, and that is why the cup did not pass from Christ.

Again, I am confident that Christ knew this when He prayed the prayer. This whole question was worked out in the eternal counsel of God, before the foundation of the world, long before Christ ever came to earth. He knew that if He was going to be the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world, then that meant He must endure the wrath of God in the process.

But this brings up yet another reason why I think Christ prayed this prayer. I've given you two already: *First*, it was a true expression of His human passions. It reflected a real dread and a sincere horror at the thought of what the cross would mean for Him. *Second*, it was an important lesson for Peter and the other apostles--not to mention you and me. This is a pattern we should follow in our own prayers. The underlying request in all our prayers should be exactly the same thing Jesus prayed for: "Your will be done." And now, *third*, I think it unfolds for us the mystery of what took place in eternity past between the members of the Godhead. As they discussed the redemption of fallen humanity and made their plan to redeem the elect, they covenanted between themselves that Christ would die to pay the price.

Titus chapter 1 hints at this. Paul opens his epistle to Titus with these words: "Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began." Now think about this: if God promised eternal life before time and creation even began, to whom did He promise it? The answer is crystal-clear: this describes a covenant that the Father made with the Son to redeem the elect.

Now, obviously, we cannot fully know the mind of God. First Corinthians 2:16: "'For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ." Scripture gives us enough of the mind of Christ so that we can peer into the mystery of it and learn from Christ's wisdom. Again, this prayer in the Garden gives us a window into the relationship between Father and Son. Here we can understand, in terms of human passions, the exchange that took place between the Father and the Son before the world began. In eternity past, as abhorrent as it must have been to think of the Son dying, and the Father pouring out His wrath on the Son--the Son willingly, deliberately submitted Himself to the Father's will, and the path to the cross was set.

That's why Peter says in Acts 2:23 that the crucifixion happened "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God." That's why in Acts 4:27-28 says that "both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, [all acted together in the crucifixion] to do whatever [God's] hand and [His] plan had predestined to take place." This was the plan of

God from the beginning, and in this prayer we see a picture of how Christ willingly accepted His part.

That leaves one question still unanswered: Why does Jesus seem to contrast His will with the Father's will? He prays in v. 39, "Nevertheless not as I will, but as you will"? Does this imply some conflict between the Persons of the Godhead? Is Christ's will *different* from the will of the Father?

Now listen carefully: the members of the Godhead do have separate, distinguishable wills. That's one of the attributes of personality. Each Person in the Godhead has a unique will. Yet there is always perfect harmony between the members of the Godhead. Christ's will is never at odds with the Father's will. And the will of the Spirit is never out of step with the Father and the Son. They are always in perfect union. That's part of what Jesus meant when He said in John 10:30, "I and the Father are one." They are one in substance, united in will. He was not saying that they are one and the same Person; but He was emphatically denying that there is any difference or disagreement in character, will, or purpose between the heavenly Father and His only begotten Son.

So here when Christ prays, "nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will"--we are not to think that there is any disparity between the will of the Father and the will of the Son. Instead, what we see here is the Son consciously, deliberately, voluntarily subjugating all His natural human desires and passions to the perfect will of the Father.

Remember that string of verses I read earlier about how the Son committed Himself to doing the father's will? Let me read them again: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work." (John 4:34); "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 5:30); "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38); "He who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him." (John 8:29).

So this prayer in the garden ("nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will") graphically reveals how Christ in His humanity voluntarily surrendered His will to the will of the Father in all

things--precisely so that there would be no conflict between the divine will and His humanity.

There's a great practical lesson in this passage for Christians, isn't there? Christ had no sinful appetites, no desires that were perverted by sin, no inclination to do wrong ever. Yet if *He* had to submit His appetites and passions to the will of God with such deliberate, purposeful dedication, how much more should we concentrate on surrendering our hearts, our souls, our minds, and our strength to God? All our infirmities, all our desires, our appetites, and our very wills--must be consciously submitted to the will of God if we expect to be able to live our lives to the glory of God.

Now let's be honest with one another: even with our best efforts and most diligent praying, we *can't* live our lives perfectly to the glory of God. But this episode in the life of Christ isn't recorded merely to give us an example to follow. It does give us a good example, but if that's all we got from it, we would be left without hope.

And if this passage has any message at all, it's a message of blessed hope for fallen sinners.

And this is the best, most encouraging truth at the heart of our text: It reminds us what a high price Christ paid for our redemption. All that he feared; all that He ultimately suffered; he did to redeem us from our sins. He paid in full a price that you and I could never pay. If we suffered in hell for all eternity, we would still never be able to pay the price of sin. So Jesus paid the price on our behalf, and then rose from the dead, signifying that God was pleased--and the wrath of God fully satisfied, by the price He paid. All who trust Him will find in Him salvation, no matter how deep your guilt or how dark the stain of sin. Christ gives eternal life freely, as a gift, to all who lay hold of Him by faith. It's a simple truth (the gospel)--and the only way of salvation from our sins. But the promise of Scripture is straightforward (Romans 10:9): "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."