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Bible Text: Matthew 26:31-34
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In the 26th chapter of the gospel as recorded by Matthew verses 31 to 46. Verses 31 to 46. I wonder if we couldn't read that responsibly too so we'd all have a part in it. Beginning with verse 31 of Matthew 26 and going down to and including verse 46. Matthew 26:31-46.

31 Then saith Jesus unto them, All ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad. 32 But after I am risen again, I will go before you into Galilee. 33 Peter answered and said unto him, Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended. 34 Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. 35 Peter said unto him, Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee. Likewise also said all the disciples. 36 Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane, and saith unto the disciples, Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder. 37 And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and very heavy. 38 Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me. 39 And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt. 40 And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with me one hour? 41 Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. 42 He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done. 43 And he came and found them asleep again: for their eyes were heavy. 44 And he left them, and went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. 45 Then cometh he to his disciples, and saith unto them, Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46 Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray me.

And now the 41st verse, "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." So in the passage which we read and that which immediately precedes it and follows it, we have the record of the most critical event in the history of the world. I think there can be no doubt of that at all, that it had about it and upon it more mighty historic significance, greater human weight of weal and woe than any other event or series of events in the history of mankind. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of men, was about to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. He was about to offer his holy soul to have poured out upon that soul the accumulated putrefaction and moral filth of the whole race of man and to carry it to the tree and die there in agony and blood.

Now there was one present, the one most vitally concerned, who anticipated this crisis and prepared for it. That one, of course, was Jesus. And he prepared for it by the most effective preparation known in heaven or in earth, mainly prayer. Our Lord prayed in the garden. Let us not pity our Lord as some are inclined to do, let us thank him that he foresaw the crisis and that he went to the place of power and the source of energy and got himself ready for that event. And because he did this, he passed the cosmic crisis triumphantly and I say cosmic crisis because it had to do with more than this world, it had to do with more even than the human race, it had to do with the entire cosmos, the whole wide universe for the Lord was dying that all things might be united in him and that the heavens as well as the earth might be purged, and that new heavens and new earth might be established that could never pass away, and all this rested upon the shoulders of the Son of God here this night in the garden and he got ready for this, I repeat in the most effective way known under the sun, and that is by going to God in prayer.

But over against that were his disciples. They approached the crisis without anticipation. Partly they didn't know. Partly they didn't care. Partly they were too unspiritual to be concerned, and partly they were sleeping. So carelessly and prayerlessly and sleepily they allowed themselves to be carried by the rolling of the wheel of time into a crisis so vital, so significant, so portentous that nothing like it has ever happened, I repeat, in the world and never will happen again. And the result of their failure to anticipate was that one betrayed our Lord, one denied our Lord, all forsook our Lord, and all fled away. Then Christ gave them, here in the text read, Christ gave them these words as a sort of a little diamond set in this great ring, he said, "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation for the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." And this is what I want especially to talk about now, and I want you to know that this prayer that Jesus made that night in the garden was an anticipatory prayer, that is, he prayed in anticipation of something that he knew was coming in the will of God and he got ready for it.

Now this is what I want to emphasize and will lay upon your conscious this morning, that you practice anticipatory prayer because battles are lost before they're fought. Now you can write that line across your heart or across your memory and history of the world in biography will support it, that battles are always lost before they are fought. It was true and is true of nations. It was true of France in the Second World War. There are those of us who date back, were growing up at the time of the First World War, and we remember

how the cry electrified the world, "They shall not pass," and pass they did not when France in her state rose and opposed herself to the words of the Kaiser. But only 25 years and a little more, 26 at the most later, the words of Hitler came down and France surrendered almost without firing a gun, and to this day men don't know why. Only last week, I saw that some angry Frenchman has written a book flailing his own country and lashing his people that they surrendered with scarcely a fight. But why did they lose the battle? Why did France surrender? She surrendered because between the hour of her finest hour when she cried, "They shall not pass," and her disgraceful surrender, she had gotten rotten and decayed, politically decayed and morally decayed and spiritually decayed, and like an old tree filled with dry rot when the tanks of Hitler came sweeping down like a stormy wind, France went down and she's never risen since and she still manifests the same spirit in her politics and in her social life that caused her to lose the Second World War.

Now, my friends, if that can be true of nations and history will support it, it's also true of pugilists. They say of fighting men that they leave their victory in the nightclub, and although I've never seen a fight and I don't attend them, they still do illustrate and Paul used these games to illustrate and so can I, they do illustrate the fact that a man to be at fighting peak must take care of himself and when a man, as some have done, deem world acclaim and become very popular, they find themselves going to the nightclubs and drinking and staying up all night and sleepily loafing in the day, and then comes the time when they're to fight again, though they try desperately to get ready by what they call training, the nightclubs have taken too much out of them. So they go into the ring and collapse in the fifth round and people say, "How could it be that this mighty world-beater should go down so disgracefully before a man who is not rated, wasn't supposed to be good?" The answer was not is that he lost the fight before he went into the ring, not when they counted him out there on the floor face down and unconscious, but that he drank wine and stayed up and danced half the night or all of the night. He left his victory in the nightclubs, they said.

It was also true of Israel up on a higher level. Back yonder in the Old Testament times, you will find that when Israel went in righteous and prayed up, she never lost a battle, but when she went in filled with iniquity and prayerlessly she never won a battle. Israel never lost a battle the day she fought it and she never won a battle the day she fought it. She always lost her battle when she worshiped the golden calf or sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play, or when she intermarried with the nations, or when she neglected the author Jehovah and raised up a heathen altar under some tree. It was then that Israel lost her battle and so it was by anticipation, you see, it was before it happened that she lost and it was true of the disciples here as I've already mentioned. They didn't lose the day in the morning when one of them cursed and said he was not a disciple, another kissed Jesus and said, "Here's the man, go take him," when even John who loved him forsook him and fled and they all sneaked away and melted into the night. That was not when the collapse came, the collapse had started the night before when tired and weary they lay down and slept instead of listening to the voice of their Savior and staying away to pray. If they had stayed awake and prayed alongside of him and heard his groans and seen his bloody

sweat, it might have changed the history of the world and certainly it would have changed their history.

But not only are battles lost before they're fought, battles are also won before they're fought. Look at David and Goliath. Everybody knows the story, we tell it to the children and the artists paint it and it's got a place in the thought and literature of all the world, how little David with his ruddy cheeks went out and slew the mighty, roaring, breast-beating giant 11 feet tall and with a sword like a weaver's beam, and yet tiny little stripling David went out and with one stone lay him low, and with his own great sword which David could hardly lift, cut off his head and carried that huge head by the hair and display it before shouting triumphant Israel. When did David win that battle? When did he win that fight? When he walked quietly out to meet that great boasting giant? No. Let somebody else try it and the words of Goliath would have been proved true, "I'll tear you to pieces and feed you to the birds," he said. And under the circumstances, he'd have done just that but David was a young man who knew God and he had slain the lion and the bear, and he had taken his sheep as the very charge of the Almighty and he had prayed and meditated and lay under the stars at night and talked to God, and had learned that when God sends a man, that man can conquer any enemy no matter how strong. And so it was not that morning on the plain there between the two hills that David won, it was all down the years to his boyhood when his mother taught him to pray and he learned to know God for himself.

Then there was Jacob. Do you remember that after 20 years he was to meet his angry brother who had threatened to kill him? He'd never seen him, he'd gotten away so that Esau couldn't kill him, and now he was coming back and the Lord revealed that the next day they would meet there on the plain beyond the river Jabbok. And the next day they met down on the plain and they threw themselves into each other's arms and Esau forgave Jacob and Jacob conquered his brother's ire and his brother's murderous intent. When did he do it? Did he do it that morning when he walked out to meet his brother and crossed over the river? No, he did it the night before when he wrestled alone with his God. It was then he prepared himself to conquer Esau, Esau being the sulky, sullen, hairy man of the first who had solemnly threatened after the oriental oath that he would slay Jacob when he found him. How could he cancel that oath? How could he violate the salty oath taken after the manner of the East? God Almighty took it out of his heart when Jacob wrestled alone by the river. Always it's so. And Jacob conquered Esau the night before, not when they met but the night before they met.

And so it was with Elijah. Elijah defeated Ahab and Jezebel and all the prophets of Baal and brought victory and revival to Israel and when did he do it? Did he do it that day on Carmel? I counted as I sat here, not that I wasn't enjoying the service, for I certainly do enjoy every second of it, all the singing and all the rest, but I counted the words. Do you know how many words there were in Elijah's prayer? After Baal, all day long had prayed and leaped on the altar and cut themselves till they were bloody, then Elijah walked up at six o'clock in the evening at the time of the going of the evening sacrifice, Elijah walked up and prayed a little prayer. Was it a prayer that took him 20 minutes as we sometimes do in prayer meeting and shut others out? Was it a long eloquent prayer? No, it was a

blunt, brief, little, little prayer of exactly 66 words in English, and I would assume fewer in Hebrew. So there was a prayer. Did that prayer bring down the fire? Yes and no. Yes, because if it hadn't been offered there would have been no fire. No, because if Elijah hadn't known God all back down the years and hadn't stood before God during the long days and months and years that preceded Carmel, that prayer would have collapsed by its own weight and they'd have torn Elijah to pieces.

So it was not on Mount Carmel that Baal was defeated, it was in Mount Gilead, for remember that it was from Gilead that Elijah came. And I always feel I'm a better man after reading this story, how that great, shaggy, hairy man dressed in the simple, rustic garb of the peasant came down boldly staring straight ahead and without any court manners or any knowledge of how to talk or what to do, walked straight in smelling of the mountain and the field and stood before the shrinking, timid, cowardly, hen-pecked Ahab and said, "I'm Elijah. I stand before Jehovah and I'm just here to tell you there will be no rain until I say so. Good-bye." That was a dramatic moment, a terrible moment, a wonderful moment, but back of that were long years of standing before Jehovah. He didn't know he was to be sent to the court of Ahab, but he had anticipated it by long prayers and waitings and meditating in the presence of his God.

Now, my brother, there are crises that wait for us out there, as there was a crisis that faced Jesus and his disciples, and David, and Israel and Daniel and Elijah and all the rest. There are crises that wait for us. I want to name a few of them briefly.

One of them is acute trouble. Now, I hope it doesn't come to you, but the history of the race shows that it comes to us all at some time, and when sharp trouble with its shocking, weakening sting comes to us, some Christians meet it unprepared and, of course, they collapse, but is it the trouble that brings the collapse? Yes and no. It is the trouble that brings the collapse in that they wouldn't have collapsed without the trouble, but it is not the trouble that causes them to collapse because if they had anticipated it and prepared for it, they would not have collapsed. The man who goes down unto trouble says the Proverb, his strength is small, and his strength is small because his prayers are few and lean. But the man whose prayers are many and strong, will not collapse when the trouble comes.

Then there's temptation, temptation that comes unexpected and subtle, and it's too unexpected and too subtle for the flesh, but anticipatory prayer gets the soul ready for whatever temptation there may be. Was it the day that David walked on the roof top that he fell into his disgraceful and tragic temptation? No, it was his long gap that the historians say was in between, and they don't know what David was doing. I know one thing David wasn't doing, he wasn't waiting on his God. He wasn't out lying, looking at the stars and saying the heavens declare the glory of God. He did that, but that's the time he wasn't doing it. And so, David went down because the whole weight of his wasted weeks before, bore down upon him. So temptation can't hurt you if you have anticipated it by prayer, and temptation will certainly fell you if you have not.

And then there's Satan's attacks. Now Satan's attacks are rarely anticipated because Satan's too shrewd to be uniform. You see, if Satan established a pattern of attack, we'd

soon catch on to his pattern. If I could go to the games to illustrate. I've never seen but one ball game in twenty years and no prize fights, but if you allow me again, as Paul, to illustrate. If the devil were to be uniform and regular in his attacks, the human race would have found him out a long time ago, and the poorest old church member would have known how to avoid him. But because he is not uniform but highly irregular and mixes things up, he is deadly if we haven't the shield of faith to protect ourselves.

Take the pitcher for instance, he doesn't start throwing when the first inning begins and throw the same ball in the same place for nine innings. If he did, the score would be 128 to nothing. But what does he do? He mixes them up, and the batter never knows where they're going to appear. First up, then down and in and out, then low, then fast, then down the middle. He mixes them up. It is the absence of uniformity that makes the pitcher effective.

And you think the devil isn't as smart as Dizzy Dean or Billy Pierce? Do you think the devil doesn't know that the way to win over the Christian is to fool him by irregularity? Never attack him twice the same way in the same day. Keep coming in from one side one time, another side another time like the boxer. You think that boxer goes in there and gets himself rigidly stereotyped? He leads with his left, he strikes with his right, he moves back two steps, he moves forward two steps. Why, the commonest stumble-bum would win over a fighter like that. A fighter has to use his head too and first he attacks from one side, then from the other, then dashes in then backs away, then pedals backward and then then charges, and then it's left and right, then feints then sidestep, and then ducks and weaves and bobs, and you know how they do it. You won't believe this, but I used to fight when I was a kid, a young fellow. You wouldn't believe that would you? You'd think that anybody big enough to lift a boxing glove would be able to knock me down, but I was never knocked off my feet. I was too fast.

And, my brother, that's the way to do it. The devil doesn't come in always the same way; every one of us, any of us could figure him out. But he will come at you today like a wild bull of Bashan, and tomorrow he'll be as soft as Ferdinand. And the next day he won't bother you at all. Then he'll fight you three days in a row and let you alone for three weeks. Remember, it was said of Jesus after the three temptations, he left him for a season. Why? To get the Lord to drop his guard, of course.

And so, the devil fights like a boxer, he pitches them in like a skilled pitcher. He uses strategy. Now, I say that's why it's pretty hard to anticipate him, you don't know what he's going to do next, but you can always put a blanket anticipation down. You can always figure that the devil is after you. And so, by prayer and watching and waiting on God, you can be ready for his coming when he does come, and you can win. Not the day he arrives but the day before he arrives. Not the noon he gets to you, but the morning before the noon. And the only way to win then consistently, my brethren, is to keep the blood on the doorpost, keep the cloud and fire over you, and keep your fighting clothes on, and never allow the day to creep up on you. Never get up early in the morning and look at your clock and say, "I'll miss my train," and dash away. If you must dash away, take a New Testament along. Instead of reading the Tribune, read your New Testament on your

way to work then bow your head and talk to God. Get ready. Now I don't recommend that. It's too fast and too uncertain but I say rather than not pray at all, grab prayer somewhere in the morning. "I met God in the morning when the day was at its best," said Christian. So I recommend never let a day creep up on you. Never let Thursday floor you because you didn't pray on Wednesday, and never let Tuesday get you down because you were prayerless on Monday, and never let three o'clock in the afternoon floor you because you didn't pray at seven in the morning. See to it that you get prayed up somewhere.

Now I have 1, 2, 3, 4 that are recommendations and I've got eight minutes, that means two minutes apiece and then we'll turn you loose to go out into the sunshine and think over these things. But you want to take down these four little thoughts that I'm going to give you to close, little conclusions and all sermons should have conclusions.

Never act as if things were all right. Now if the devil lets you alone a while and you're not in much trouble and you're reasonably happy and reasonably spiritual, you're likely to develop a complex that says, well, things are all right, and you'll neglect your prayer life and you don't watch and pray. Remember, as long as sin and the devil and disease and death are abroad in the land like bears, like a contagious disease, things are not all right. And you're not living in a healthier, wholesome world, healthful world, a world that is geared to keep you spiritually healthy. This vile world is not a friend of grace to lead us on to God. It's the opposite. So instead of assuming that things are all right, assume that they're always wrong and then prepare for them and anticipate them from whatever direction they come. That's number one.

Number two is never trust the devil and say, "Things are all right because this devil business is overdone and I won't pray today. I'll wait till Wednesday." Never trust the devil. Just as you can't trust a Communist, you can trust the devil, because it's from the devil the Communists learn their technique and get their psychology and justice. No statesman worthy of your vote or trust ever ought to trust a Communist as long as he's a Communist. So we never must trust the devil, never. Never imagine that he's smiling. Never look at a picture of him by Dore or somebody and say, "Oh, he's not a bad looking devil. Perhaps all this is more or less, it's like Santa Claus and Jack Frost. It's only imaginary." Never trust the devil.

Always anticipate any possible attack by watching and praying, for the spirit though it's willing, the flesh is terribly weak. Again, never become overconfident for the very reason I've stated that our Lord stated the flesh is weak. Never become overconfident. Many a man has lost a fight from overconfidence and many a businessman has lost a business because he was overconfident.

And fourth, never underestimate the power of prayer. "Watch and pray," said Jesus and he wasn't talking poetry. "Watch and pray," said Jesus and he practiced it and won because he did practice it, and caught the spinning world that sin had thrown out of gear, caught them in the web of his own love and redeemed them by the shedding of his own blood. He did it, I say, because he readied himself for that awful event, and that glorious

event, by prayer the night before and by prayer in the mountains at other times, and by prayer down the years through his boyhood.

Never underestimate the power of prayer, and remember that without it you cannot win, and with it you cannot lose. Granted, of course, that it's true prayer and not saying of words. Granted your life is in harmony with your prayer. If you pray you cannot lose, and if you fail to pray you cannot win for the Lord gave us the example of anticipatory prayer, getting ready for any event by seeking the face of God in watchful prayer at regular times. Then no matter what happens, like Jesus Christ our Lord, like Daniel and Elijah and the rest, you can go triumphantly through, for prayer always wins.