

“Praying as Jesus Prayed in the Garden”

Matthew 26: 36-42

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Text: Matthew 26:36-42 (NIV) ³⁶ Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." ³⁷ He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸ Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." ³⁹ Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." ⁴⁰ Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. ⁴¹ "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." ⁴² He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

The Lord Jesus Christ said these passionate words:

"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

Jesus has been telling his disciples all along that his ultimate destiny was Crucifixion. He has known that his death would come upon a Roman Cross. Yet, here he is saying "May this cup be taken from me." Why? Because Jesus would

have been like every other first century Jew who had spent time in Jerusalem. He would have seen the bodies of men hanging upon crosses stripped bare and bleeding from their hands and feet and baking in the sun...or soaked from a desert rain...rotting flesh so putrid that even the most hardened man would look away. Jesus had seen that...for sure. And so here he is in his perfect humanity saying "My Father, I really do not want to be crucified! Is there any other way to achieve that for which I was sent into the world? If not...I receive your will." The ultimate prayer of despair...and acceptance. Let us pray before we go further.

After World War Two, America spent billions of dollars helping Europe rebuild. Our efforts were headed up by General George C. Marshall; President Truman rightly labeled it "The Marshall Plan." Perhaps millions of people were saved from starvation. In a burst of grateful eloquence, Winston Churchill described it as "The most unsordid act in history." Quite a description to be sure. "Sordid" comes from the Latin word for "dirt." So, "unsordid" would mean, figuratively, morally pure or pristine.

I've always thought that Mr. Churchill's statement was a great and sincere compliment to America. But honestly, I think it was slightly overstated. Actually, the most "unsordid act in history" was the Lord Jesus Christ giving himself up to Crucifixion to save others.

No human act, however kind and beneficent, could compare to the sacrifice of our Lord. In fact, I suspect that we have not really grasped this event...the Crucifixion. On the Sunday before Easter, let's look ahead to that night in Gethsemane...and to that sorrowful and magnificent prayer.

Consider these words of our Lord Jesus Christ...consider them closely please:

³⁸ Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."

We must not move quickly over these words. **“My soul is overwhelmed to the point of death!”** These are the words of a man in a state of sheer wholesale terror! So...why might we move too quickly past what he is saying? Probably because modern evangelicalism so emphasizes the Deity of Christ...that Jesus Christ was the perfect sinless embodiment of God taking on flesh...his Divine nature is so important to us in that the Christ lived without sin in the person of Jesus of Nazareth...that we almost forget that Jesus was a real, living, human being with actual flesh and blood. This was not God just pretending to be a man. Or was it a man pretending to be God. It was the perfect God-man.

A bit of history before we proceed to meditate upon these words. In the year 451 AD, a group of church leaders from all over Christendom met in the City of Chalcedon near Constantinople in what is now modern Turkey. Their goal was to agree on an understanding of exactly who Jesus was. You remember that the Gospel of John tells us that the world was made thru the Divine “Logos” or the Word of God. And that the “logos” was the power and might of God. That power and might that made the world took on flesh. To be precise we read:

John 1:14 (NIV) ¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The Word became flesh when the child Jesus was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary. In other words, there was never a time when the “Logos” or the “Word” or the did not exist. But there was a time when the human being Jesus of Nazareth did not exist. We see that throughout the early part of the Gospels. The eternal Word came and dwelt in the human being Jesus of Nazareth. The Christ and the man Jesus integrated perfectly in a Divine-human state enabling Jesus to live without sin. The Council at Chalcedon issued a beautifully written summary by Pope Leo called “Leo’s Tome.” It says that the one person had two

natures...Divine and human. It says that Jesus was "Fully God and fully man!" Leo put it this way:

"Without detriment to the properties of either nature and substance which then came together in one person, *majesty took on humility!*" [A Short History of Christian Doctrine, Lohse, p. 91]

This is actually a very important statement. It means that in the Lord Jesus Christ, we see real Deity and real humanity. There is no pretending going on. The two natures are perfectly integrated but they do not intermingle so as to invalidate each other. In other words, when Jesus falls asleep we are seeing his human nature behave in a perfectly human way. When Jesus says "Before Abraham ever was I am" [John 8:38] we are seeing his Divine nature speak as the Christ within him. Why would this matter? Because if we are not careful we will be so taken with the wonder of the Lord Jesus Christ and the reality of God taking on flesh...that we will tend to think "Oh...because he was God in the flesh he could do anything including endure the horrors of Crucifixion!" I've even read of skeptics who argue that the Crucifixion was just sort of an act because if Jesus was God in the flesh all he had to do was shift into supernatural mode and endure it! Almost as if somehow...the suffering and terror experienced by Jesus was somehow mitigated because he was both God and man.

It is important to grasp this: Jesus trembling in the Garden and asking his friends to stay near him....that Jesus was as human as any one of us...only without sin. He was a real, genuine human being...a grown man who had seen the gross horrors of crucifixion and he was just as terrified as we would be even though he knew he would be resurrected! Jesus was, as Edwards would say "Looking directly into Hell itself!"

³⁸ Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."

Here we read “overwhelmed with sorrow” and we have the word “perilupas” ... we say the word “periphery” meaning all around something. “Lupas” was the word for “grief.” Jesus was saying that all around him all he could see was grief! Overwhelmed with the reality that he was going to be dragged off and subjected to a mock trial with no representation and then spit upon and punched and kicked...and then flogged so badly that he would nearly bleed to death before his Crucifixion! Then he would be nailed to a cross and hung up naked and bleeding for everyone to see and mock! This was not just what God did for us but what God the Christ asked of Jesus the innocent servant! My guess is that the Divine nature in Jesus had prepared his human nature for what was coming. And it was the human nature that would be tortured and bleed and die; the Divine nature could not die and I think the Divine nature experienced Hell itself! But before the Divine nature could be released the human nature had to be executed! Little wonder, Jesus said:

"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."

Some say Jesus was sorrowful that man's sin had made his sacrifice necessary. That's almost an intellectual explanation as if Jesus was philosophically ruminating on the sad state of the world. I think not! I think he was personally and very humanly filled with sorrow because he saw what was coming. And what did he see? He saw every single sin that you and I would ever commit being gathered up in a great Divine storm and brought overhead like a Tsunami of evil and coming down right on top of himself! That is why these words are found in the New Testament:

1 Peter 2:24 (NIV) ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

2 Corinthians 5:21 (NIV) ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

What's that mean? Jesus become sin for us? It means that his entire human soul was held responsible for all the sins we would ever commit and that the Cup of Wrath of God's judgment was poured out on him! Little wonder that Jesus prayed later:

"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.

The "cup" in the Bible might be a cup of celebration or joy...or wrath and fury. This is how God spoke thru the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah when He described the Day of Judgment:

Jeremiah 25:15-16 (NIV) ¹⁵ "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me: "Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. ¹⁶ When they drink it, they will stagger and go mad because of the sword I will send among them."

Jesus knew very well that the "Cup of God's Wrath" would fall upon himself now to pay for the sins of the elect...to redeem the flock he had been given! And the very image of it even to the sinless Jesus who loved the Father most perfectly...the very image of it was beyond terrifying!

Ulysses S. Grant was in command of a Union Army going over a steep hill into battle...expecting to find his enemies waiting with overwhelming force to cut him to pieces! Grant said he was so terrified and could barely breathe from fear as they crested the hillside...only to find no one waiting! All at once he was

relieved and overjoyed that he knew they would live at least another day. But there was no relief for Jesus for he knew what was up on the hill awaiting him...a hill they would call Calvary!

"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."

1 Peter 2:24 (NIV) ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree...

But somehow that statement is distant and abstract. He himself bore my sins and your sins upon the tree...the Roman Cross. What does that really mean? It means that Jesus saw it coming friends! It means this gentlemen: all those times you undressed that woman in your mind and grieved God with your lust? Jesus paid the penalty for each time! All of those times were written down and their penalty was dumped on Jesus on the Cross! All those times ladies that you did something like that or you would not forgive or you lied to someone or put yourself first in a burst of vanity...those times were sinful and they grieved God and they were gathered up into a Cup of Wrath and spilled out upon Jesus! Every lie I've told and every moment of petty jealousy or envy...all dumped on Jesus! Think of it! If fifty billion people have populated Planet Earth and every one of them sinned ten times a day for fifty years....how many trillions to the tenth power of sins were gathered up like so many stones and dumped upon Jesus? The next time we go outside on a starry night we should look up and count the stars and realize that...far more than that number were and would be the sins of mankind that would be cast upon Jesus! Little wonder he was terrified and little wonder our Savior said:

"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."

What can such fear do to living flesh? Some years back, an animal lover named Gary Richmond wrote a book called **"A View from the Zoo!"** It's filled with stories about his life as a zookeeper. One account comes to mind. He tells of the day when the Los Angeles Zoo finally acquired a massive, dark female rhinoceros that they named Twinkletoes! The animal in her crate was too large to be driven to the back of the zoo where she would live. So, after considering their options, they decided to bring in a crane and literally airlift the crate with the rhino inside many hundreds of yards to the designated area. Twinkletoes had already been driven forty miles down the L.A. Freeway! She had arrived quite agitated. But now here was this 7,000 pound animal in a crate suspended at about a hundred feet for half an hour being slowly moved across the zoo! Since rhinos have very poor vision, the animal was beside herself with moaning and groaning and anxiety and her handlers actually saw tears running down her face.

Lowering the crate was the hardest part and even though it was handled carefully, it came down with a heavy thud...of course! They opened the crate and the rhino burst out in a rage and ran headlong into a barrier and fell to ground. As it got up unsteadily, they noticed something puzzling...it was covered with a glistening red layer of sweat! A thin layer...of blood! A veterinarian on the team explained that these great beasts can experience such fear that the small capillaries burst all over their bodies and blood mingles with sweat. It is called Hematidrosis...the bursting of blood vessels in a state of extreme anxiety. The animal was literally sweating blood.

Consider the account of Luke as he gives us this detail about Jesus praying in the Garden:

Luke 22:44 (NIV) ⁴⁴ And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

It says Jesus was in "anguish!" It is the Greek word "agonia" meaning agony! Jesus the healer and Jesus the gentle and Jesus the one who fed the masses was himself in agony over what was coming! So, he continued to ask for relief! How afraid was he? So afraid that he experienced Hematidrosis...droplets of blood all mingled in with his sweat falling into the soil from which man was made. Jesus had not been captured yet and he had not been punched yet and he had not been nailed to the Cross yet but even so he was in such severe terror that he was sweating blood! And I've read that animals in that state often fall over and die...so it was perhaps the last miracle of Jesus that he did not die right then before he even got to the Cross! Are we not grateful?

But here is a question: if you were in that state and you could get out of it would you not do so? It's easy to say Jesus had to go thru with it but we must not be so quick to say that either! His Father loved him so completely that surely he could have turned away from his agony and left his tormentors with no one to crucify....the way he did back in Luke Chapter Four when the crowd pushed him to the brow of the hill to kill him...he just walked supernaturally thru them. But now...his time had come.

And so he prayed with pleading and passion three times. It is always three times when God is confirming something. We read:

Matthew 26:39 (NIV) ³⁹ Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

And the disciples did to Jesus the same thing we would do and the same thing we do from time to time...they neglected him because their own bodily desires were more important. They desired to sleep the way man desires to go thru life sleepwalking with Christ off to the side. The very people for whom he was

bleeding could not even stay awake for an hour to just be with him. They left him alone...long before they ran away and denied him. Only adding to his agony.

But the prophet Isaiah had said this is what would happen. It was all foretold seven centuries before...how he would be abused and how man would misunderstand the entire event. We read:

Isaiah 53:3-5 (NIV) ³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴ Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

In other words, the people watching Jesus suffer and die thought that he was being tortured by God for his own sins! But actually he was punished and crushed for their sins and our sins! So, if on that night in the Garden Jesus had walked away from his suffering...and punishment...you and I would someday sweat blood and face the terror of the Divine Cup of Wrath! But because the Christ had made the world and mankind was His own...and the first Adam had disobeyed...there was one thing more important to Jesus than his own desire to stop suffering. It was his even greater desire to take our sins upon himself and do the Father's will.

Matthew 26:39 (NIV) ³⁹ Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

God said to the first Adam in the Garden of Eden "If you do not obey me, you will die." Then God said to Jesus, the Second and Last Adam "If you do not obey me...they will all die!" So...we close with a question. Was it possible for the "Cup" to be taken away? The "Cup" of wrath...of judgment...of payment for sins? We suppose. But then someone else would have to drink it. And that someone else...*would have been you and me!* It was God's will that He Himself suffer the penalty that had be suffered so He took on flesh and obeyed the requirement that He himself had made. And in the end, the Father's will was the will of Jesus...and the will of Jesus was the Father's will. It never even occurred to him to not take that Cup. Why? Because Jesus loves us so much that he would have suffered even more if he had to watch each of us drink that cup. Remember this: Jesus chose to sweat blood and be Crucified rather than watch you and I do so. This is the Gospel: Jesus experienced Hell...so we would not have too!

Let us pray.