The Praying at Gethsemane
Matthew 26:36-46
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The account of Jesus and the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane can also be found in the other synoptic Gospels (Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:40-46), but John did not record it in his gospel. It is a pivotal moment in the last days of Jesus' life as it moves to the location of His arrest and reveals His attitude toward His coming crucifixion. There is much to learn about Jesus in this section, as well as much to apply to ourselves.

The arrival at Gethsemane (26:36)

After the last supper that Jesus ate with His disciples, He left Jerusalem and took the eleven (minus Judas) *"to a place called Gethsemane."* Gethsemane was to the east of Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley, on the southern part of the Mount of Olives. The name *"Gethsamane"* came from two Hebrew words meaning "oil press," indicating that this was likely in a grove of olive trees, which John referred to as a *"garden"* (John 18:1, 26).

This is the first record of Gethsemane in Matthew. Luke recorded that He had been there many times before *"And He came out and proceeded as was His custom to the Mount of Olives"* (Luke 22:39). John 18:2 added He had frequently been there with the disciples, *"for Jesus had often met there with His disciples."* So this would not be surprising to the disciples that they would go to Gethsemane.

He told His disciples to *"sit here while I go over there and pray."* He would be *"about a stone's throw"* away (Luke 22:41), close enough to be near by, but far enough to be away from the group and not be heard by them. His purpose of prayer introduces the theme of this passage of Matthew.

The anguish of Jesus (26:37-38)

Jesus *"took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee,"* whom He had separated out from the other disciples before (cf. Matthew 17:1; Mark 5:37; Luke 8:51). Once alone with these three, He *"began to be grieved and distressed."* This is the first outward demonstration of His emotional state as the hours approached for His crucifixion. His grief referred to His state of sorrow, and His distress was the inward trouble He felt toward the coming events.

He verbalized His feeling to Peter, James and John, *"My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death."* Beyond these words, they likely could witness His demeanor, and the extent of it being *"to the point of death"* refers to the intensity of His internal suffering. His purpose for telling the three disciples of His agonizing distress was so they would *"keep watch with Me."* This command made the point that they were to remain alert, particularly since it was late into the night after an hectic evening with the Passover meal. Luke adds that He told them *"Pray that you may not enter into temptation"* (Luke 22:40; cf. Matthew 26:41), probably referring to the temptation of their flesh to sleep at this pivotal moment in world history.

The appeal by Jesus (26:39-44)

Jesus left the three and went *"a little beyond them,"* which probably was still close enough that they could hear His prayer, and therefore it is recorded for us. This assumes that He was about a stone's throw from the other disciples and only a little beyond Peter, James and John, though matching the words between Luke and Matthew does not allow us to be certain.

Matthew states that *"He fell on His face and prayed,"* which is consistent with the great distress He experienced. Luke's *"He knelt down and began to pray"* (Luke 22:41) is simply a more general description of His posture. Similarly, Mark's *"fell to the ground"* (Mark 14:35) is another way to describe His physical approach to this prayer. As with all prayer, Jesus' physical position was obviously secondary to the content of His words.

Regarding the content of His words, Mark summarized His prayer, writing that He *"began to pray that if it were possible, the hour might pass Him by"* (Mark 14:35). Matthew records these words specifically, *"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will."* While Jesus often called God His Father, this is the only record in the Gospels where He calls the Father by the term *"My Father."* Mark 14:36 preserved the Aramic word *"Abba!"* which highlights the close relationship between the Father and the Son.

Jesus' request is remarkable. By asking for the Father to *"remove this cup from Me"* Jesus expresses His desire to avoid the coming agony of the crucifixion. The Old Testament frequently uses the metaphor of a cup to refer to suffering and death. At times it is also used specifically for the suffering resulting from God's wrath (e.g. Psalm 11:6; 75:8; Isaiah 51:17, 22; Jeremiah 25:15; 49:12). The Book of Revelation likewise uses the image of a cup as the outpouring of God's wrath (e.g. 14:10; 16:19).

Therefore, use of the word cup in this context is significant in light of what would occur in the death of Christ. He would bear the punishment for our sin in order to deliver us into the eternal life of His kingdom.

- *"The LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him"* (Isaiah 53:6).
- *"My Servant will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities"* (Isaiah 53:11).
- *"We shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him"* (Romans 5:9).
- *"He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him"* (2 Corinthians 5:21).
- *"He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness"* (1 Peter 2:24).

In addition to seeing the work of Christ through His atonement for sin at the crucifixion, we can also see the person of Christ in this request. We see our Lord's desires being yielded to the will of God when He said, *"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will."* Therefore, we see that His obedience to the Father was chosen by Him, not forced upon Him. In this, He *"knew no sin"* (2 Corinthians 5;21) and *"without sin"* (Hebrews 4:15), *"as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ"* (1 Peter 1:19).

Because Jesus could have a wish to have the cup of suffering removed from Him, even though this was not the will of God, we see evidence of His humanity in the incarnation. This theological truth has been a challenge for many throughout the centuries, where many had difficulty understanding Jesus' expression of a desire that was outside the will of God. Jesus was completely human, and He *"emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross"* (Philippians 2:7-8).

The truth of the incarnation of Christ was He was sent to live among us by becoming man. In doing so, He laid aside certain aspects of His divinity temporarily. For example, He laid aside His omniscience, *"But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone"* (Matthew 24:36). It may be possible that this lack of complete knowledge could extend to the manner of His atonement for sin, although Isaiah 53:5 states that *"He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities."*

Nevertheless, Jesus expressed a real desire for another way to serve the will of God apart from experiencing the crucifixion for the sin of man. If there was another way for those who were called by God to be redeemed apart from the crucifixion, then Jesus' requested that *"this cup pass from Me."* But there was no other way.

In no way does this diminish the esteem for the Son of God by revealing a desire that was not fulfilled. Rather, this only exalts His greatness by emphasizing His willing submission to the Father by choosing to be *"obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross"* (Philippians 2:8). This expression of love for God the Father and love for man was the pinnacle of greatness. *"Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends"* (John 15:13).

When Jesus returned from praying He *"found them sleeping."* Earlier, these same three men *"had been overcome with sleep"* at the occasion of the transfiguration of Christ (Luke 9:32). This is obviously why Jesus exhorted them to *"keep watch with Me"* (Matthew 26:38). Jesus' prayer was not short, as His question, *"you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour?"* indicates.

While their sleep was not surprising, it certainly added to the evidence that they did not grasp the gravity of the moment. Jesus was already *"grieved and distressed"* before He found His three closest disciples asleep. Their failure to keep watch with Him must have added to the distress, especially in light of His frequent statements regarding His impending betrayal and arrest, as recently as earlier that evening.

Luke 22:45 provides more information regarding their sleep, *"When He rose from prayer, He came to the disciples and found them sleeping from sorrow."* This then indicates their issue was sorrow, rather than apathy. Luke, being a physician, would have recognized how their depressed state of mind might relate to their sleepiness. Yet this did not excuse them, for their sorrow showed they failed to fully believe what Jesus had said about His resurrection and allowed themselves to be unwatchful.

Only Matthew and Mark detail the three cycles where Jesus goes to pray, only to find them sleeping. Luke summarizes these three episodes into one account, with additional information about His prayer, *"Now an angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him. And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground"* (Luke 22:44). Thus Matthew and Mark include more about the disciples in their accounts while Luke then emphasizes Christ's distress the most.

In His compassion, God sent an angel from heaven to strengthen the Son in this time of grief. Jesus' prayer was so fervent that He was sweating in the dark of a Spring night. The sweat *"became like drops of blood,"* not that Jesus necessarily actually bled. While there is a rare condition where blood vessels can constrict and dilate to the point of rupture into the sweat glands, this is not inherent in the meaning of this verse, and could be a description of the intensity of His prayer.

Matthew and Mark are the two Gospels that include Jesus' words, *"Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak"* (Matthew 26:41; Mark 14:38). Even at this dire time, Jesus was compassionate with His disciples and their struggles. The spirit is a reference to their human spirit, not the Holy Spirit. The flesh is a reference to their physical impotence, rather than their sinful nature.

In our humanness, we are weak and unable to do what our heart, mind, and will desire. We have a volition that can become compromised under circumstances that press against the weakness of our humanity. Our fleshly bodies suffer from the fall of man, leading us to be inclined to serve our own needs, in spite of our noble intentions. We grow weary and *"lose heart in doing good"* (Galatians 6:9). We can become afraid, which is why Jesus taught *"do not fear"* (Matthew 10:26-31). Even when we do pray, *"we do not know how to pray as we should"* (Romans 8:26). In spite of all we know, biblically and experientially, about our weakness, we still think more highly of our abilities than we ought to think (cf. Romans 12:3).

Matthew 26:42-44 describes the same thing taking place three different times. In each case, Jesus goes off to pray, only to return to find them sleeping. His second time to pray, He reiterates His prayer, but with an even greater focus upon the will of God being done, *"My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done."* This is the model for us, to pray *"Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"* (Matthew 6:10). We are instructed to *"let your requests be made known to God"* (Philippians 4:6), but these requests that we desire must be secondary to the will of God.

By the third time Jesus returns from praying *"the same thing,"* He again finds them sleeping. The three cycles also show the weakness of the three disciples. The three closest disciples, who would become the leaders of the church, succumbed to the temptation to grow sleepy. This is a stark contrast to the three cycles of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness by Satan (Matthew 4:1-11). The disciples did not resist the temptation to be weary, even in spite of two rebukes from the Messiah, their physical need for sleep overcame their spiritual need to pray.

These three cycles show the importance of persistence in prayer, as Jesus taught in the parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18:1-8. This is important even in submission to the will of God. Jesus did not engage in meaningless repetition of the same words (cf. Matthew 6:7-8), but He expressed the desire of His heart in humble submission. His persistence was an expression to trust in God to do the best thing and is a prime example to us.

The arrest of Jesus (26:45-46)

Jesus woke the disciples up with the attention-getting exclamation *"behold."* He says this twice, once in regard to *"the hour is at hand"* and again in regard to *"the one who betrays me is at hand."* The time for prayer was over and the disciples had slept through their opportunity.

After praying for quite some time, He met the hour that was at hand with courage, knowing what loomed. He also called His disciples to do likewise by saying, *"Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!"* This was likely spoken to all the eleven disciples, since Judas was approaching *"While He was still speaking"* (26:47). They all must arise immediately to go forward to meet the moment of His betrayal and arrest.

Since *"While He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, came up accompanied by a large crowd with swords and clubs,"* there can be little doubt that Jesus was well aware of this large crowd approaching from across the Kidron valley *"with lanterns and torches and weapons"* (John 18:3). The disciples were to go with Jesus, who *"knowing all the things that were coming upon Him, went forth"* (John 18:4) to meet this crowd. Thus the events of Jesus' final hour of life would commence.

Conclusion

Jesus returns to the garden of Gethsemane to pray before His betrayal and arrest. He takes His disciples with Him in His last hours to teach them to *"keep watch"* so that *"they may not fall into temptation."* His agonizing prayer anticipates His suffering and though He desires to avoid it, He submits to the glorious plan of God to suffer and die for the sins of the world.

Jesus' prayer is a model for all believers, who have a willing spirit but a weak flesh, and who have a much more difficult time aligning our personal desires with the will of God. While we have specific desires for our life, it may at times be in conflict with God's divine plan. We must pray the prayer that Jesus prayed, *"Your will be done,"* and even more so when God's plan leads to suffering. Jesus' obedience in the face of temptation enabled Him to minister to us in time of need. *"For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin"* (Hebrews 4:15). "*For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted"* (Hebrews 2:18).