

"Nevertheless...."
Sermon Series *The Hinge of History #1*
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(Mt. 26:36-46)

Introduction.

One of my favorite places in all of Scripture is the Garden of Gethsemane. I have always had a fascination with it, and whenever I have read of our Lord's spending time in prayer in that garden, I've always tried to visualize in my mind's eye what it must have looked like. I was so taken with Gethsemane that I even wrote a song about it when I was in college.

So when Lorie and I had the privilege of travelling to the Holy Land several years ago, one of the places I looked forward to visiting most was the Garden of Gethsemane. And I was not disappointed. It was even more special than I imagined. There in this beautiful garden stands large and expansive olive trees. Some of them are 2,000 years old. They were there with Jesus during His night of prayer. The trees are now gnarled and gangly, but they speak of ruggedness and standing the test of time. From the garden you can look out over Jerusalem, because Gethsemane is just east of the city, up on the Mount of Olives, and it looks down over the Kidron Valley and toward the Eastern Gate.

During our trip to the Holy Land, I spent some time by myself in that garden. It was important for me to reflect on Jesus' prayer in that place and think about the experience He had there. And Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane has been a model for seeking God's will in my life ever since.

I. The Need of Jesus.

The Bible tells us that after celebrating Passover with His disciples and instituting the Lord's Supper during the meal, and after Judas left the group in order to betray Jesus to the Jewish authorities, our Lord went to the Garden of Gethsemane along with His disciples. The name "Gethsemane" means "oil press." It was a place where they grew olives and crushed them to produce oil. Ironically, it would also become the place where Jesus submitted to being "*crushed for our iniquities,*" as the prophet Isaiah put it.

The passage tells us that after leaving the other disciples behind and urging them to watch and pray, Jesus took Peter, James and John, the inner circle of three, a little farther into the olive grove with Him. And there He fell to the ground and began to pray.

I think it's important to note that Jesus had needs just like all of us when He went through this difficult time. Even though Jesus was fully God, He was also fully human. And He had a need for human fellowship, and He had a need for fellowship with the Father.

By instinct we humans want someone to be with us whenever we have to face a difficult challenge. We want someone to be there with us in the hospital the night before surgery, and it always helps whenever someone is there in the nursing home as the end draws near. Wherever we experience a great moment of crisis, we want someone to be there with us. We don't necessarily want that person to do anything. We don't even necessarily want them to talk to us or have us talk to them. We just want them to be there. Jesus was like that, too.

The night I found my father dead in our home after he suffered a massive heart attack, I was 22-years-old and had just graduated from college. It was about midnight when I found him, and I had just returned home from a date with a young woman. After trying to revive my dad without success, I contacted my brothers and our family doctor to find out what I should do next. I called the police and arranged for a funeral home to come and retrieve his body. And I cried.

Then I called the young woman I was dating at the time, the girl with whom I had been out that night. Even though it was 2:00 AM, I asked if she would meet me and go grab a coke somewhere. (There weren't any coffee shops back in those days.) I just needed to be with someone, and she gave me a wonderful gift that night. She sacrificed her night's sleep just to offer me comfort, and it meant more to me than she will ever know.

In times of trouble, we need friends to be with us. That's the way Jesus felt, too. The burden and agony were so great that He didn't want to go it alone. He needed other people; He needed His friends. He needed the ministry of human presence.

But the passage also indicates that Jesus needed the fellowship of His heavenly Father. In the prayer that Mark records in his gospel Jesus cried out, "*Abba, Father*" (Mk. 14:36). The Aramaic word *Abba*, is expressive of an especially close relationship. It was the Aramaic intimate form for the word "father," and it meant "Daddy" or "Papa." In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus called out for His heavenly Father, His Papa.

We see in our passage that despite Jesus' plea and His warning to watch and pray, the disciples let Him down. When Jesus needed them the most, they all fell asleep. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak. Christ asked, "*Could you men not keep watch for one hour?*" (40). We can hear in our Lord's words a tone of frustration and disappointment.

The fact of the matter is that people will let you down, and they'll disappoint you. And you will find that ultimately God is the only one you can fully count to

support you when all is said and done. Corrie Ten Boom, a survivor of the German concentration camps in WW2, once said, "Look around you and get distressed. Look inside you and get depressed. But look to Jesus and be at rest." God will be there for you even when people let you down.

II. The Prayer of Jesus.

The passage goes on to say that Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane, realizing that His hour had come, and He got down on His knees and prayed, "*My Father, if it be possible, may this cup be taken from Me. Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will*" (26:39).

"Nevertheless" – it's a word we don't use much anymore. It's a carry-over word from the old King James Version of the Bible. Sometimes it's translated "notwithstanding" or "yet", even "besides". But the closest we can get to that word in the original Greek comes out like this – "In opposition to anything said or done." I think that's what Jesus tried to express in His prayer here. Despite how He felt, despite the fact that He didn't want to die or endure the humiliation and pain of the cross, in opposition to everything He felt and thought and wanted, Jesus committed Himself to do the will of His Father.

"If it be possible, let this cup [of suffering] pass from Me." In other words Jesus was saying, "If there's another way we can do this, show it to Me, Father." Have you ever felt like that? Has it ever happened that the events in your life didn't work out the way you wanted them to, and you wanted God to show you another way? It might have been a marriage you thought would last forever, but it didn't. It might have been a career ladder you were climbing, and suddenly a rung broke. Or it might have been a diagnosis from the doctor you didn't want to hear. "Isn't there another way, Lord?" If this has ever happened in your life then this word "nevertheless" is for you, and it's for me. It means that no matter what happens in our lives, no matter how awful it becomes, Jesus has been there, too. And He will be with you through the dark days you have to face.

Three times Jesus prayed, "*My Father, take this cup from Me,*" and each prayer ended with, "*Nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will.*" He submitted His personal desires to the Father, and then He resigned Himself to do God's will. And from His agony of dread, Jesus emerged with resolute confidence. Later on when Peter drew his sword in a frantic attempt to prevent the arrest, Jesus was able to say, "*Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given Me?*" (Jn. 18:11).

Christ made His decision to die in the garden, and He committed Himself to do the Father's will there in prayer. In a real sense the battle was won in the Garden of Gethsemane, and I believe that was the turning point in the drama of salvation. The betrayal and abandonment by His friends, the night of trials, the beatings and taunts, the death by crucifixion, becoming sin for us – they were all simply a living

out a decision He made in the Garden of Gethsemane. And it was a decision that was made as a result of prayer.

I believe that a pattern for prayer emerges in this passage which we can follow. And the apostle Paul repeated this same pattern in 2 Corinthians 12 when he prayed three times that the Lord would take away his thorn in the flesh. The pattern is to speak honestly and candidly to the Lord about what our heart's desire is. We are to lay it clearly before His throne of mercy and not candy-coat our request or our need. But having laid it before the Father, we're to leave it with Him and let it rest in His will. Our ultimate request is that the will of God be accomplished.

Are you facing a problem this morning? Do you have a major decision you need to make this week? Is there a meeting coming up in the next few days that you are dreading? Are you afraid of the future and dealing with the unknown that is to come? Then let me encourage you to follow the example of Christ. Lay the matter clearly before God, and tell Him exactly what you want or hope for. Then leave it with Him, asking that His will be done. That's the pattern of Christ's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, and we would do well to follow Jesus' example in our own lives today.

III. Praying and Living the Will of God.

The prayer that Jesus prayed that night was reminiscent of the prayer He taught His disciples when they asked Him, "Lord, teach us how to pray." Do you remember the words He instructed them to say in the Lord's Prayer? "*Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" The will of God the Father was the highest and chief concern of Jesus both in the Lord's Prayer and in His prayer in Gethsemane. And in the end it became apparent that God's will for Jesus was to tragically die on the cross.

How do we reconcile suffering with the will of God? And how are you and I to pray when we find ourselves in the midst of suffering? In his book *Discovering God's Will* Jerry Sittser writes that the answer we give to these questions will in large measure determine how we respond to the suffering that forced the questions on us in the first place.

Is God in control or not? If He is, then we can trust Him as He works out His redemptive purposes in the world, just as He was with Jesus and in the suffering our Lord endured on the cross. If God isn't in control, then we might as well abandon faith and find our own way through life without looking for God to help. The choice is that stark and that simple, although the struggles and doubts we have along the way are anything but simple.

Sittser says that suffering is simultaneously both *inside* and *outside* the will of God. It runs contrary to what God intended for the world He created, yet it also

fits into His providential plan for history. The cross of Christ is the quintessential example of this paradox. It was history's darkest hour, and it was its greatest moment. It was an affront to the will of God ("You shall not murder"), and it was the fulfillment of God plan of redemption (Acts 4:23-31). It was a terrible injustice, and it was the ultimate expression of God's perfect justice and mercy.¹

Suffering is like a forest. It encloses and overwhelms us so completely that we simply cannot see beyond the suffering itself. And like a forest, it obscures our vision. But there is more to the landscape than we are able to see, and God is working out His good purpose in our lives regardless of what it looks like at the moment. If we follow the trail of trusting God by faith, just as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane, committing ourselves to do the will of the Father no matter what it may cost us, then God will bring us through the suffering to resurrection on the other side. And the rich harvest our faith produces will be worth it all in the end.

Fourteen months ago Lorie and I began a journey neither one of us would have ever chosen if it was up to us. In January of last year she was diagnosed with multiple myeloma. It's a cancer of the blood which affects the bones. There is no cure, but it is treatable. Our journey with cancer this past year has been one of the greatest challenges to our faith, but it's also been one of the best schools of discipleship in which we've ever been enrolled.

Just about every day I pray three things – 1) that Lorie's cancer will go into remission; 2) that God will heal Lorie miraculously; and 3) that they will find a cure for multiple myeloma. But every day I also pray, "Lord, Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

On our best days both Lorie and I want God's will for our lives more than we want anything else, because we know the best life we could ever live, in this world and in the next, is found in living in the center of the Father's will. God loves so much that He sent Jesus to die for our sins, so He has our best interest at heart. We can be sure of that. And because of our conviction that He loves us and He is working out His purposes in this world, we can trust God on this journey with cancer, regardless of how it all plays out.

Conclusion.

"Nevertheless...." It's Jesus' word to all of us during this season of Lent. It's a word that helps us take hold of the promises of God, whatever our situation may be, and whatever may come our way. It's a word of relinquishment that trusts in the love and the goodness and the grace of God.

G. Ashton Oldham once wrote, "Prayer is the chief agency and activity whereby people align themselves with God's purpose. Prayer does not consist in battering the walls of heaven for personal benefits or the success of our plans.

Rather it is the committing of ourselves for the carrying out of His purposes. It is a telephone call to headquarters for orders. It is not bending God's will to ours, but our will to God's. In prayer, we tap vast reservoirs of spiritual power whereby God can find fuller entrance into the hearts of men."²

That's what we see happen with Jesus in His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. May we think on these things as we make our way to the cross this holy season of Lent. These are the events that were truly the hinge of history. They are also events that are the hinge of our faith. Amen.

¹ Gerald Sittser, *Discovering God's Will*, p. 130.

²G. Ashton Oldham. Source unknown.