

"The Garden of Grief"
Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom*
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First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
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(Mt. 26: 36-56)

Introduction.

Have you ever had a dark time in your life when it felt like you had the weight of the world was on your shoulders, and you wondered how you were going to cope and make it through? Did you ever have an experience in which you were scared to death over what was about to happen, or the burden of a decision you had to make was almost too great to bear? Have you ever felt completely alone, abandoned by friends and family, and you knew the only person you could really count on was God? If you have ever felt that way, take comfort. So did Jesus, and we read about His experience in the gospel of Matthew.

I have been to the Garden of Gethsemane, and I have seen the olive trees there that are now over 2,000 years old. Being in that place and reflecting on the agony of Jesus' decision the night before His crucifixion has given me a greater appreciation for all He went through for you and me. Today as we remember these events and as we prepare our hearts to make our journeys through this Holy Week, I want us to think deeply about what happened in that garden 2000 years ago and how Jesus faced His crisis with courage and faith.

Let me set the scene for you. The Last Supper is over, and Jesus has finished His final instructions to the disciples, and He has prayed for them. The Bible tells us that after eating the meal they sang a hymn, and together they left the upper room and walked through the streets of the city of Jerusalem in the stillness of the night. In the soft light of the Paschal moon, they crossed the Kidron Valley and began to climb the Mount of Olives.

As they walked, Jesus and His disciples turned off into an olive orchard named "Gethsemane." The name means "oil press." Evidently it was a favorite retreat for Jesus, for in the gospel John it says that He "*had often met there with His disciples*" (18:2). Something took place in this garden which helps us to understand the passion of Jesus. It was truly a Garden of Grief for Him. I would like for you to notice three matters with me this morning: 1) the need of Jesus; 2) the prayer of Jesus; and 3) the betrayal and arrest of Jesus.

I. The Need of Jesus.

Our text tells us that when they entered the garden Jesus left the other disciples behind, and urging them to watch and pray, He took Peter, James and John, the inner circle of His three disciples, a little farther into the olive grove. There He fell to the ground and began to pray. B.B. Warfield, a great Presbyterian theologian of the 19th century, wrote a study entitled, "On the Emotional Life of Our Lord,"¹ and in the course of his essay he refers to the terms employed by the Synoptic gospel writers in relation to the Garden of Gethsemane.

For example, he notes that Luke uses the word *agonia*, from which we get our English word "agony." Matthew and Mark share two expressions which speak of a "trouble of soul and despondency." Mark uses another word of his own, which is translated "deeply distressed." It's a term which can also mean "horror-struck" or "alarmed dismay." Put together these expressive words indicate that Jesus was feeling acute emotional pain which caused Him to sweat profusely as He looked with apprehension and almost terror at His future ordeal.

I think it's important to note the need of Jesus during this difficult hour. Note that He had a need for human companionship, and He had a need for fellowship with the Father. **The Need for Human Companionship** can be seen by the fact that in His hour of trial, Jesus needed His friends. Even though He was the Lord of the universe and the text says He could call upon 12 legions of angels if He wanted to, Jesus took the twelve disciples with Him, and then the inner circle of three. Christ felt the need for their presence in His time of crisis.

In our difficult moments, we want someone with us, don't we? We don't necessarily want that person to do anything, and sometimes we don't even want to talk to them or have them talk to us. We just want them to be there. We want their presence. Jesus was like that, too.

When my late wife Lorie died in 2016, my son David came and lived with me for about a month. He left his home in Colorado and stayed with me from the week before Lorie passed away until after Thanksgiving, and I can't tell you what a gift that was to me. He helped fill the void, he took care of some of the planning and coordination for Lorie's memorial service, and he kept me putting one foot in front of the other. In addition, my friend Jim Singleton called me every day for six months after Lorie died. Those were dark days in my life, and I needed their fellowship. I look back now with such gratitude for what my son did and for what Jim did and the way they provided the companionship I needed in my darkest hour.

Whenever we go through a difficult season, we need people to be with us. That's the way Christ felt, too. The burden and agony were so great He didn't want to go it alone. He needed other people. He needed His friends. He needed the ministry of presence, just like you and me. Who needs your companionship this week? Who do you need to visit or call to bring them comfort today?

We also learn in this passage that Jesus needed **fellowship with the Father**. In His prayer He cried out, "*Abba, Father*" (36). The Aramaic word *Abba*, is expressive of an especially close relationship. It was the Aramaic intimate form for "father." It meant "Daddy" or "Papa." And in that moment, Jesus was calling out for His heavenly Father, His Papa.

Jesus learned in the Garden of Gethsemane that sometimes people will let you down and they'll disappoint you, and ultimately it's only the Father who is able to provide the ultimate support you need the most. There are times when only God will be for you what you need when all is said and done. In our passage we see that despite Jesus' request and His warning to watch and pray, the disciples let Him down. When Jesus needed them the most, they all fell asleep.

Try as they might and even when they have the best of intentions, people will sometimes let you down. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. It's in those moments when we come to realize that ultimately only God can be for us what we need the most. He's the only one who has the resources to really be there for us. 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 God and be at rest."

II. The Prayer of Jesus.

The passage goes on to tell us that three times Christ prayed, "*My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from Me. Yet not as I will, but as you will*" (v. 39). The cup Jesus didn't want to drink symbolized a number of things. It represented the physical pain He would experience in being flogged and crucified. It also represented being abandoned by His friends and the emotional hurt of being rejected by His own people. But in addition to all this the "cup" represented all that *and* the spiritual agony of bearing the sin of the world. In other words, the cup represented the divine judgment of God which bearing our sin required.

There are many references in the Old Testament to the "cup." For example, Ezekiel 23, Psalm 75, and Job 21 all speak of the way in which the "cup" was a regular symbol of God's wrath, and in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus contemplated the implications of His coming death and it laid Him low. John R.W. Stott asks a great question worth considering, "The agony in the garden opens a window on to the greater agony of the cross. If to bear man's sin and God's wrath was so terrible in anticipation, what must the reality have been like?"²

Jesus prayed three times, "My Father, take this cup from Me," and each prayer ended the same, "Yet not what I will, but what You will." He submitted His personal desires to His heavenly Father, and He resigned Himself to do God's will. It is striking that from His agony in the garden, Jesus emerged with resolute confidence, and 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. He made His decision to do the Father's will there in prayer. I think the real battle was won in the garden, and that was the turning point in the Passion narrative. The betrayal and abandonment by friends, the night of trials, the beatings and taunts, and even death by crucifixion and becoming sin for us was simply a living out of this profound decision which Jesus made as a result of prayer.

I believe this passage presents a biblical pattern of godly prayer, and it's a pattern that is repeated by Paul in 2 Corinthians 12. You'll recall that there 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're to lay it out clearly before God and not candy-coat our request or our need. But having laid it before the Father, we leave it with Him and let it rest in His care.

Our ultimate request is to be that God's will be done. So
when there is a relationship that is breaking our hearts,
when we're afflicted with an illness or disease,
when we want a change in our job situation,
when we hope to be selected for that honor,
when we long to find a companion in life,
when we ache in our hearts over a child,

it's in those moments we're invited to lay the matter clearly before the Father, let Him know exactly what we want or hope for, and then we leave it with God and ask that His will be done. We can do this with confidence because we know that if God loved us so much that He sent His Son to die on the cross for us, then He can be trusted to have our best interest at heart. That's the pattern of Christ's prayer, and we would do well to follow this pattern in our own lives.

III. The Betrayal and Arrest of Christ.

The text tells us, "*While He was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priest and the elders of the people*" (v. 47). The fact that Judas knew to look for Jesus in Gethsemane shows that the Lord was in the habit of going there, and Judas was accompanied by a crowd sent from the Sanhedrin. The crowd consisted of a detachment of soldiers and some official attendants of the religious Council, and they came armed with swords and clubs. Apparently, they thought they would meet resistance.

The prearranged "signal" or means of identifying Jesus was for Judas to kiss him. Rabbis were customarily greeted by their disciples with a kiss, and it was a

sign of respect and affection for a well-loved teacher. But this was a kiss of betrayal. Of this kiss NT scholar James Stalker has written, “As long as there is true, pure love in the world, this act will be hated and despised by everyone who has ever given or received this token of affection. It was a sin against the human heart and all its charities. But none can feel its horror as it must have been felt by Jesus. That night and the next day His face was marred in many ways: it was furrowed by the bloody sweat; it was bruised with blows; they spat upon it; it was rent with thorns: but nothing went so close to His heart as the profanation of this kiss.”³

When the soldiers arrested Jesus, one of the disciples drew a sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. John tells us in his gospel that the disciple was Peter. Aroused from sleep, the disciple came stumbling forward and tried to take matters into his own hands. Apparently, Peter aimed at the man's head, but the servant of the high priest sidestepped the blow, and it only caught his ear. Matthew tells us that Jesus rebuked Peter, and He healed the wounded ear of the servant.

The crowd of soldiers and representatives of the Sanhedrin stood there with torches and weapons, and Jesus protested the manner of His arrest. He said He had been teaching every day in the Temple courts and they could have arrested Him there anytime, but they chose to come at night, like this. It was as if Jesus was saying, “This is your hour and the power of darkness. This midnight hour is your hour, because you’re the sons of night, and the power you wield against Me is the power of darkness.”

At this, all of the disciples deserted Jesus, and they fled for fear of their lives. He was abandoned by His closest friends in His most critical hour of need. It really was the Garden of Grief.

Conclusion.

I want you to notice how honest the Bible is in depicting the humanity of Jesus. NT scholar C.F.D. Moule has written that in this passage Jesus is shown to be “anything but above temptation. So far from sailing serenely through His trials like some superior being unconcerned with this world, He is almost dead with distress.”⁴

As I close this morning, let me ask you some questions. **First, how have you let Jesus down recently when He was counting on you?** When you’ve had the opportunity to talk with a classmate, a friend, or a co-worker about Jesus, did you tell them about the Lord? When a neighbor was going through a divorce or an illness, did you try to be there for them? When you saw on the TV the devastation of hunger around the world, did you try to do anything about it? When a friend had a new baby, did you take them a meal or volunteer to take their kids for an

afternoon? How have you abandoned Christ when He wanted you to step in, and what do you think the Lord wants you to do about that now?

Second, have you like Peter tried to take matters into your own hands?

Instead of waiting on the Lord, when have you tried to step in and help heaven along with accomplishing the Kingdom of God? We need to learn to wait on the Lord, to take our cues from Him, and not try to do things by ourselves. The hot-headed anger of a person can never accomplish the work the Lord desires.

Finally, has the agony of the Jesus' passion truly touched your heart? Do you really appreciate all that Christ endured for you? Have you taken time to think about the pain He experienced to provide for your salvation, and have you thanked Him for it?

In one of his radio programs about life in Lake Woebegone, Garrison Keillor recalled his childhood Thanksgiving dinners as the family gathered around the table and remembered the blessings of the past year. Uncle John usually gave the prayer, which caused everyone to squirm. As Garrison Keillor put it, "Everybody in the family knew that Uncle John couldn't pray without talking about the cross and crying....Sure enough, Uncle John prayed, talked about the cross, and he cried. Meanwhile, the rest of us shifted nervously from one foot to the other and longed for the prayer to end." Then Keillor added this powerful observation, "All of us knew that Jesus died on the cross for us, but Uncle John had never gotten over it."⁵

Is there someone here this morning to whom the Holy Spirit has been speaking, and you're starting to understand perhaps for the first time all that Christ has done for you in His suffering and death? I encourage you to open your heart to Jesus during this holy week and invite Him to take up residence in your life. Exchange your rags of sin for the royal robes of the righteousness of Christ, and receive the free gift of eternal life. If you had been the only person on earth, Christ still would have come to die for you. He loves you that much, so much so that He went through the Garden of Grief. Amen.

¹Warfield's essay is published in his book *The Person and Work of Christ*, pp. 93-145.

²John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p.77.

³James Stalker, *The Trial and Death of Jesus Christ*, pp. 10,11.

⁴C.F.D. Moule, *Gospel of Mark*, p.117.

⁵ Taken from Bill Bouknight in "Standing in the Light of the Cross", *Good News*, Mar./Apr. 2002, p. 21.