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Sermon Summary #44

Jesus in Gethsemane: The Paradox of a Supplicating Savior Mark 14:32-42

What strikes me most as we enter with our Lord into the Garden of Gethsemane is the shocking contrast it presents with what has preceded. The events of Passion Week, up to this point anyway, seemed to have the aura of divine control. Jesus has repeatedly displayed remarkable confidence and courage and determination that reassures and reaffirms our faith in him as sovereign Lord. In his handling of each situation and in the unfolding drama of Passover, the prelude to his death, he expressed a calm dignity, a quiet power that cannot help but evoke awe and amazement.

He predicted without the slightest hint of fear or hesitation his own arrest and death. In Matthew 26:2 Jesus said to his disciples: "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified." Without so much as flinching he declared that when Mary anointed him with expensive perfume it was in preparation for his burial (Mk. 14:8). Last week we saw him give instructions to his disciples on how they should prepare for the observance of the Passover meal, and at that meal he calmly prophesied that one of the 12 who sat at the table would betray him into the hands of his enemies! If that weren't enough, he then told them that the bread and wine they were to receive from him pointed to his impending sacrifice of himself for sinners that they might be forgiven!

But with Gethsemane, everything changes. Suddenly the sovereign Son of God is found pleading with his heavenly Father that if possible he be spared this horrid death. He who only moments earlier sat rejoicing with his friends in the fellowship of a common meal is now grieved and distressed, groveling in the dirt with loud cries and tears. Why?

The word *Gethsemane* itself means "oil press," and was the name given to this particular enclosed garden in which gnarled olive trees were the most distinguishing characteristic. In John 18:1-2 we are told that Jesus used to go there often with his disciples to pray. I believe there is significance in the fact that Jesus retreated to a *garden*.

Just as in a garden, called Eden, Adam's sinful disobedience ruined us, so too in another garden the obedience of the second Adam, Jesus, restores us! As Charles Spurgeon put it, "Gethsemane supplies the medicine for the ills which followed upon the forbidden fruit of Eden" (104).

I think D. A. Carson put it best when he said,

"In the first garden 'Not your will but mine' changed Paradise to [a] desert and brought man from Eden to Gethsemane. Now 'Not my will but yours' brings anguish to the man who prays it but transforms the desert into the kingdom and brings man from Gethsemane to the gates of glory" (545).

After exhorting his disciples to remain behind in prayer, he took Peter, James, and John with him. Eventually, however, he even left them behind and prayed alone.

The first thing that strikes us about Gethsemane is the portrayal of the almost indescribable mental, emotional, spiritual and physical anguish that Jesus experienced. The synoptic gospels together paint a graphic picture using five different words. One word alone, apparently, simply could not capture the depths of his torment:

- 1) In Mt. 26:37 he "grieved" (*lupeo*), a word that means to be sad or sorrowful.
- 2) In that same verse Matthew says he was "distressed" (*ademoneo*), a word, says Lightfoot, that "describes the confused, restless, half-distracted state, which is produced by physical derangement, or by mental distress as grief, shame, disappointment" (123).
- 3) He was also "deeply grieved" (*perilupos*; Mt. 26:38), an intensified form of the first word above; hence, grief added to grief, grief once felt and now multiplied; sorrow upon sorrow.
- 4) Luke says that he was in "agony" (*agonia*; Lk. 22:44).

5) Finally, here in Mark 14:33 we read that he was "very distressed" (*ekthambeo*), a word that describes someone who is in the grip of shuddering horror as he faces some dreadful future. It is a term that describes one's reaction to the presence of a supernatural mystery that provokes absolute terror.

Jesus was gripped by unbounded horror and suffering, the force of which drives him first to his knees, then face down upon the ground. He prayed fervently with torment so utterly overwhelming that, according to Luke 22:43, his heavenly Father dispatched an angelic attendant to strengthen him. Again it is Luke who tells us that "his sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground" (Lk. 22:44). Let's briefly consider both of these statements.

First, his weakness was so severe that God the Father felt moved to send an attending angel. Does it strike you as it does me, that the Lord of heaven and earth, our Lord Jesus Christ, should be so weak and needy that he required the strength supplied by one of his own creatures?

Jesus is the Lord over the angels of heaven! They do his bidding. They obey his will. They exist by his power and authority. Yet here he is nourished and sustained by one of them. How does one explain this remarkable act of humility, that Jesus would stoop so low for sinners like us and suffer so intensely for sinners like us that he required the assistance of his own creation to persevere?

But how could/did the angel "strengthen" the Son of Man? What did he say? What did he do? What did he bring? What did he impart?

(1) I suggest he actually infused new physical strength and energy into his weakened frame, even as was true of Samson.

(2) Perhaps the mere presence of holy company was reassuring to him. His disciples, weak in flesh, could not stay up with him. The angel was there lest he struggle alone.

(3) Surely the angel must have communicated tender sympathy to him, perhaps reminding him that all of the angelic host felt the same as they watched him in agony.

(4) Perhaps the angel bolstered his sagging spirit by *worshipping* him!

(5) Perhaps he came to remind Jesus of his ultimate victory, to remind him of the fruit that would grow from his sufferings, to remind him that Satan who tormented him would soon endure everlasting defeat.

We'll never know until we ask him directly, but I wonder if the angel might have whispered into his ear the promises given to him by his heavenly Father. Perhaps he somehow reminded him of the glory he had with the Father from eternity past or portrayed for him the glory that would again soon be his. Maybe he reassured him that no matter what he endured, he would rise again from the dead. Might the angel have described for him his second coming to earth in the company of myriads of other angels, in great power and majesty? Perhaps the angel spoke of Christ's universal dominion when one day he would rule and reign from sea to sea. We don't know what he said or did, but evidently it worked!

(6) Assuredly, he must have come with a message from the Father. Perhaps he whispered something like this:

"Be of good cheer; thou must pass through all this agony, but thou wilt thereby save an innumerable multitude of the sons and daughters of men, who will love and worship thee and thy Father forever and forever. He is with thee even at this moment. Though he must hide his face from thee, because of the requirements of justice that the atonement may be complete, his heart is with thee, and he loves thee ever" (Spurgeon, 106).

Second, the statement in Lk. 22:44 ("his sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground") has been variously interpreted. (1) It may be a figurative expression like our "tears of blood". (2) He may be saying that the sweat was the color of blood. (3) Others contend that he actually exuded blood through the pores of his skin. (4) Many have argued that he means his sweat was falling on the ground "like" drops of blood. In other words, he was sweating so profusely that it appeared like the shedding of blood.

Let's look more closely at the nature and extent of his prayers:

it was *lonely* prayer (the kind that brings with it the temptation to quit)

it was *humble* prayer (Luke says he knelt, but Matthew tells us that he eventually “fell on his face.” Here in Mark he simply “fell on the ground” (v. 35). What is going on? Our King, our Lord, our Savior, our Creator God groveling face down on the earth? What can possibly explain this?

it was *filial* prayer (he prayed, "Abba, Father", v. 36)

it was *persevering* prayer (he prayed three times)

it was *earnest* prayer ("he prayed fervently/earnestly")

it was a prayer of *resignation* ("yet not what I will, but what you will")

Why would the Son of God display such anguish and distress in the face of a future that he himself prophesied? Several explanations for the horror of Gethsemane have been made.

1. Some have argued that the "cup" (v. 36) and "hour" from which he prayed for deliverance was not death on Calvary but rather the intense suffering and agony of Gethsemane itself. Charles Spurgeon was an advocate of this view. He explains:

"I do not consider that the expression 'this cup' refers to death at all. Nor do I imagine that the dear Saviour meant for a single moment to express even a particle of desire to escape from the pangs which were necessary for our redemption. This 'cup,' it appears to me, relates to something altogether different – not to the last conflict, but to the conflict in which he was then engaged. . . . [That is to say], in the garden he felt a sinking of soul, an awful despondency, and he began to be very heavy. The cup, then, which he desired pass from him was, I believe, that **cup of despondency**, and nothing more. I am the more disposed so to interpret it, because not a single word recorded by any of the four evangelists seems to exhibit the slightest wavering on the part of our Saviour as to offering himself up as an atoning sacrifice. . . . Thus it appears to me that what he feared was that dreadful depression of mind which had suddenly come upon him, so that his soul was very heavy" (81).

It was, then, that **depression, despair, and despondency** settling upon his soul as he reflected on his present condition and his future sufferings which constituted the "cup" from which he asked to be delivered. Spurgeon then points to "how tranquil and calm he is when he rises up from that scene of prostrate devotion! He remarks, as though it were in an ordinary tone of voice he announced some expected circumstance, -- 'He is at hand that shall betray me; rise, let us be going.' There is no distraction now," notes Spurgeon, "no hurry, no turmoil, no exceeding sorrow even unto death" (85). Thus his prayer was answered and the cup of torment soon passed, enabling him to regain his composure and face his accusers with courage and strength.

2. Others suggest that Jesus was not seeking deliverance from death on the cross but from a **premature death in Gethsemane** at the hands of Satan. On this view, Jesus was praying for strength to reach the cross, not for mercy to escape it. But in the gospels "hour" and "cup" consistently refer to his death at Calvary (Mt. 20:22; John 2:4; 12:23,27; 13:1).

3. Yet another view is that Jesus was not requesting exemption from the cross but that his suffering on the cross not be prolonged for eternity. He was asking that once the agony of the hour had come that it might pass, that he might be delivered from it. He was concerned lest, when he drank the cup of divine wrath, it not be removed and he be eternally engulfed in it. Thus this prayer is for deliverance out of death by means of the resurrection rather than for deliverance from the sufferings which death on a cross would bring.

4. The most likely interpretation, in my opinion, is that Jesus was asking the Father to remove the cup from him, if that should be his will. But note that Jesus asked for removal of the cup on one condition: only if the Father should will it. If the Father willed it, so did Jesus.

But we are still left with the question, "Why did he seek deliverance from death on the cross and why did the prospect of that death evoke within him such incredible anguish?"

- Had he succumbed to the pressure of the physical and emotional distress?
- Was it the prospect of separation from family and friends that accounts for this posture?
- Was it the shame and reproach he knew his death would bring on them that caused him to hesitate?

- Or was it loneliness, the prospect of facing death in solitude?

No.

As Spurgeon has pointed out,

"Read the stories of the martyrs, and you will frequently find them exultant in the near approach of the most cruel sufferings. The joy of the Lord has given such strength to them, that no cowardly thought has alarmed them for a single moment, but they have gone to the stake, or to the block, with psalms of victory upon their lips. Our Master must not be thought of as inferior to His boldest servants; it cannot be that He should tremble where they were brave" (107).

Let's not forget that countless hundreds, perhaps thousands, of men in his own day had been nailed to a cross. Jesus had undoubtedly seen them each day alongside the public roadways as he made his way to the carpenter's shop or out into the fields where he tended sheep. Many of these had faced such a death with courage and without the slightest tinge of fear. Are we to think that Jesus was the sort who cowered in the face of what others often welcomed? No.

There is only one explanation for the mystery of Gethsemane:

The death our Lord envisioned, the sufferings he knew lay before him, was no mere physical death, no ordinary martyr's anguish. It was nothing short of the death and sufferings of one who offers himself as a penal, substitutionary sacrifice for sinners. It was the cup of divine and holy wrath he was to drink; it was his Father's cup he was to drink. It was judgment he faced, but not of a political or civil nature. It was divine and eternal judgment, and that for something he did not do! It was the prospect of enduring the righteous wrath of an infinitely holy God that alone can account for the agony of Jesus in Gethsemane.

Were that not enough, one can only imagine what hideous words Satan must have spoken in his ear.

"Jesus, Son of Man, Son of God, do you actually think that you are in any condition to bear the sins of men and women? Do you truly believe you are capable of bearing this eternal load of guilt and judgment? You're so weak! Look at you! You're a disgrace! Your sweat drops to the ground like blood. You're wallowing in the dirt! Some kind of Savior you are! Ha! And what if somehow you manage to pull it off? What do you hope to gain by it all? Look at these followers of yours: weak, selfish, sinful, prideful, arrogant, stupid men and women. You say they are your best friends, but where are they now when you need them most? They're asleep! They didn't care enough to give you one hour of attention. And of them, Judas, is about to betray you. And when he does, all the others are going to turn tail and scamper off into the night. Give it up, Jesus. It's not worth it!"

Perhaps Satan would have sought to undermine our Lord's confidence in his strength necessary to see it through:

"Jesus, just look at yourself! What makes you think you'll be able to bear up under what is about to come? You're already an emotional wreck as you think about what it will take to redeem these ungrateful jerks you call disciples. Do you actually think you can endure the kind of beating and scouring and public humiliation that is yet to come? And why should you, anyway? You haven't committed any sins? Why should these suffer for themselves? That only seems just. Are you sure you're prepared to watch your family watch you? Are you prepared to watch your mother stand at the foot of your cross as everyone mocks and slanders your name? You don't look to me like you're in very good physical shape. What happens if you die before you get to the cross? It will all have been for nothing. Give it up. Give it up."

That Jesus was **alone** must also have provided Satan with arrows to fling at our Lord.

"Look around, Jesus. Who's here to help you? Those three men over there will soon bail on you. The others won't last long either. Remember the shepherds and angels and kings who attended your birth? They're all gone. Even your heavenly Father is going to forsake you. Give it up. Give it up."

Amazingly, in the midst of his anguish and torment, it was the welfare of the disciples that was uppermost in his mind! No less than twice Jesus interrupted his prayer and went to see if they were holding up under the strain. Each time he returned to prayer, having found them weak and weary and unwilling to sustain him, Satan

must have gloated:

"See, I told you so! They care so little about you that they are not even willing to stay awake for one hour to render aid in your time of need! And yet you intend to endure an eternity of wrath for them?" I can almost hear Jesus respond: "Yes, Satan, I **will** die for them. I **will** suffer an eternity of hell for them, though they fail to give an hour of help to me!"

Spurgeon sums up:

"How black I am, how filthy, how loathsome in the sight of God, -- I feel myself only fit to be cast into the lowest hell, and I wonder that God has not long ago cast me there; but I go into Gethsemane, and I peer under those gnarled olive trees, and I see my Saviour. Yes, I see him wallowing on the ground in anguish, and hear such groans come from him as never came from [the] human breast before. I look upon the earth and see it red with his blood, while his face is smeared with gory sweat, and I say to myself, 'My God, my Saviour, what aileth thee?' I hear him reply, 'I am suffering for thy sin,' and then I take comfort, for while I fain would have spared my Lord such an anguish, now that the anguish is over I can understand how Jehovah can spare me, because He smote His Son in my stead" (131).

*"For me it was in the garden,
He prayed: 'Not my will, but Thine.'
He had no tears for His own griefs,
But sweat drops of blood for mine.
How marvelous! How wonderful!
And my song shall ever be,
How marvelous! How wonderful!
Is my Savior's love for me!"* (Charles H. Gabriel)