

Jesus Prays in the Garden of Gethsemane
Matthew 26:36-56
Key Verse: 26:39b

by Kevin Albright

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

At the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus instituted a new covenant in his blood for the forgiveness of sins. By Jesus' blood, we are cleansed and healed. We will consider this more deeply in this Easter season. In this passage, we will learn of 3 events: Jesus' prediction of his disciples' failure, Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane, and Jesus' arrest. All of us have crises to face and difficult decisions to make in our lives, even now. How can we find the way and make a right decision? How can we obtain wisdom and grace to help us in our time of need? It is not by our own strength or understanding that we prevail. May we all look to Jesus, learn from him the answer, and receive grace to love and trust him more.

I. Jesus predicts the falling away of his disciples (31-35)

Look at verses 31-32. Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: " 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

At the Last Supper, Jesus had prophesied that one of his twelve apostles would betray him. We know that was Judas Iscariot. But they had all asked him, "Surely not I, Lord?" Each one of them seemed aware of his own weaknesses and shortcomings. Now, after finishing the meal and going out to the Mount of Olives, Jesus prophesies that the remaining Eleven would all fall away. Jesus knew this based on God's word. He quoted Zechariah 13:7 saying that the shepherd would be struck and the sheep would be scattered. Here the shepherd is Jesus and the sheep are his disciples. Jesus knew that this was foretold in Scripture by the prophet Zechariah. God knows the future before it happens. God is in control of human history. Sometimes it looks like evil men are in control. It is true that evil things happen in our world every day. Murders, rapes, injustices happen daily. But God is not surprised or alarmed. God's justice will meet all the sins of man, and will be paid for, either in mercy or in judgment.

To his ominous prophecy, Jesus also added a glorious and hopeful promise: "But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Though Jesus knew of his disciples' upcoming, immediate failure, they would not be abandoned entirely. He would meet them again, in Galilee, after he had risen. "After I have risen" were Jesus' words of hope and glory. Jesus knew of the immense suffering he must undergo in the next excruciating hours. But he also knew "after I have risen..." Jesus knew he had authority to lay down his life, and the authority to take it up again, for he is the resurrection and the life (Jn 10:18; 11:25).

Peter did not like to hear Jesus' words. One time, when Jesus first predicted his own suffering and death, Peter objected saying, "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" But Jesus rebuked Peter saying, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." (16:21-23) This time Peter made a little progress: he did not question whether the shepherd would be struck. The part he didn't like was Jesus' words, "you will all fall away." Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." Peter couldn't speak for the others, but he was quite confident that he would be faithful to Jesus no matter what happened. Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." Jesus knew in detail what would happen that night. He knew about Peter's three denials. He knew about the rooster crowing. Peter refused to listen to Jesus, however, and declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." Peter expressed his hot and extreme character as a real Type A personality. Peter was very confident in himself and his commitment to Jesus. It's good that Peter expressed his love and commitment to Jesus. But he also didn't know his own limitations. It's because he depended on himself rather than on God. This strategy is destined to fail. But let's not pick too much on Peter; all the other disciples said the same.

We are just the same: sinners, with both obvious and hidden weaknesses. We don't like to admit that we have weaknesses and need to change. We resist criticism and rebuke and easily become proud and self-righteous. Then we cannot humbly pray and make progress. Please pray for all Easter conference messengers to be humble to listen

and learn from prayerful suggestions for improvement. May God give us all humility to accept rebukes, corrections and suggestions with an earnest desire to be conformed to the likeness of Christ (Ro 8:29).

II. Jesus prays at Gethsemane (36-46)

Next Jesus went with his disciples to a garden called Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, just outside the city of Jerusalem. Gethsemane means "olive press" for it was an olive garden. It was a private place where Jesus often met with his disciples. Jesus said to the disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." Jesus was a man of prayer. Jesus taught his disciples to pray. The Bible implores us to pray. Then what is prayer? On the very elementary level, it is asking God for something. This is also called 'petition.' James 4:2b says, "You do not have, because you do not ask God." Sometimes our problem is that we do not ask God in prayer for what we need. Sometimes however, we ask with wrong motives. James 4:3 goes on to say, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." John Knox of Scotland described prayer as follows: Prayer is an earnest and familiar talking with God, to declare our miseries, to implore for support and help in our adversities, and to praise for our benefits received.

Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane shows us that prayer is a spiritual battle. All too often we come to God with a list of things that we would like to see happen or something we would like to receive. All too often however, our prayers are weak and self-centered. We are in a spiritual battle against sin and temptation both in us and all around us. Paul wrote in Eph 6:12, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." Prayer is serious warfare. As we engage earnestly in gospel ministry, we can expect evil opposition and hindrance. So we must all the more earnestly depend on God and fight the good fight in prayer.

Jesus took Peter, James and John with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. He said, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." Jesus had sometimes been upset with the crowds or even with his disciples, especially for their unbelief and self-centeredness. But here it says that Jesus was 'sorrowful and troubled.' Furthermore, Jesus said, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." John 12:27 expresses this same sentiment, when Jesus' last days were near: "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!"

Why was Jesus overwhelmed with sorrow? Jesus knew in detail the suffering and pain that awaited him. Jesus already foretold his betrayal by Judas, his denials by Peter and the falling away of the rest of them. All this would bring him great emotional pain. Jesus knew of the false accusations, the mocking, the spitting. This would bring tremendous humiliation. Jesus knew of the severe flogging, the beatings, the crown of thorns, the heavy cross, the nails in his hands and feet, the sword piercing his side. All this meant unbearable physical pain and torture. But there is another pain which no other human being has ever had to bear: the pain of taking up the sin of the world. 2Cor. 5:21 describes this: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Again, Peter expressed this in 1Pe 2:24, "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."

All of us have felt the misery, regret and self-loathing of our sins, like lust, greed, lying, idolatry. But we do not know what it feels like to take up the sins, shame and guilt of others and to be punished for it. We all know what it is like to be punished by a human authority--a parent, a teacher or a policeman, for wrong things we have done. But we have not experienced what it is like to have all of heaven's holy, righteous judgment and wrath poured out on us. All this made Jesus overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. It was Jesus' mission from his Father God. It was his cup he had to drink. Isaiah prophesied, "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering...Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows...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." (Isa 53:3-5)

After telling his top 3 disciples, "Stay here and keep watch with me," Jesus went a little farther, fell with his face to the ground and prayed. The weight of his divine mission caused Jesus to fall to the ground and cry out in prayer to God. Jesus was fully human; he had to live with human desires and limitations. Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus was 'tempted in every way, just as we are...' Jesus had to battle basic human desires like all of us, including desires to eat

too much, sleep too much, give in to sexual desires, give up a godly endeavor, despair, blow up in unholy anger, take an easier way, or save himself.

What did Jesus pray? Look at verse 39b. "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Jesus prayed to his Father in heaven. Even though the path before Jesus was beyond what any human could bear, Jesus did not doubt or question God's love. He was sure of God's love and good purpose. As we know, Jesus taught his disciples to pray to God saying, "Our Father in heaven." So all followers of Christ have the right and privilege to call God "Father," for we have adoption into God's family through faith in Jesus Christ (Gal 3:26). Still, Jesus is uniquely the Son of God by his very nature. Both at Jesus' baptism and at Jesus' transfiguration God spoke from heaven about Jesus saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." (3:17; 17:5) Jesus, as the holy and sinless Son of God, always did what pleased his Father, God (Jn 8:29). Jesus said in Jn 6:38, "For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me."

At the same time, even though Jesus was fully divine in nature, he was also fully human, with a human will. So he prayed, "If it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Jesus' obedience to God was not easy or automatic. He still had to wrestle against his human desires and will. Our natural human desire is to save ourselves. Our inclination is to live. The desire to live might be the strongest desire common to all people. Our will is to live. Our will is to find an easier way. Our will is to enjoy pleasures, achievements and human glory and honor.

God's will is different. Jesus said in John 6:40, "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." God's will is for us to believe and trust in Jesus Christ and have eternal life. God's promise is that whoever looks to Jesus and trusts and obeys him shall not perish but have eternal life (Jn 3:16). For Christians, Paul tells us God's will in 1 Thess. 5:16-18, "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." So God's will for followers of Jesus Christ is to always be joyful and thankful and to pray constantly.

How can we know the will of God? Romans 12:1-2 says: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will." To know God's will, we must offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God and not conform to the pattern of the world.

God's will is usually different from our human will. God's will for Jesus was to die as a ransom for many as the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world (Jn 1:29; Mk 10:45). God's will is not easy. But it is always best and most blessed. We must rid from our minds the thought that we can have a better idea or plan than God. This is a delusion and it is from Satan. This is why Jesus called Peter, "Satan" when Peter tried to dissuade Jesus from suffering, for it was God's mission for Jesus.

We learn from Jesus the essence of true prayer that is powerful, pleasing and effective. It is to accept and follow the will of God. Jesus shows us that we can pray with power and effectiveness only when we are submitted to God's will. One young woman was greatly frustrated for most of the past year because she did not get what she desired. Finally, she accepted that God's will might be different than her idea. Then tears of joy began to flow for days. She found peace and assurance of God's love when she learned to pray: "not as I will, but as you will." One famous preacher said there are two prayers that God will always delight to answer: "Have mercy on me," and, "Your will be done." Jesus taught his disciples and us to pray, "your kingdom come, your will be done." Powerful prayer is submitting to God: "Lord, what do you want? Help me to know and do it." What is your helpless situation? What is your cry? It may be you are looking for life direction or unemployment or finding guidance in marriage or choosing a college or serving in ministry. It may be you worry about loved ones who are lost or battling health issues. Bring it to God in prayer. Hebrews 4:16 says, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." There is a hymn called, "Did You Think to Pray?" The refrain goes like this: "Oh, how praying rests the weary! Prayer will change the night to day; So, when life seems dark and dreary, Don't forget to pray."

Do you remember what Jesus had instructed his disciples? He said, "Stay here and keep watch with me." Did they? Well, they stayed there. But they didn't keep watch. Rather, Jesus returned and found them sleeping. He asked Peter,

"Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." Peter had boasted that he could die for Jesus. But he could not pray for even one hour. His boast did not match reality. Peter probably thought, "I can fight any time, Jesus." But he couldn't pray. Jesus didn't need fighters. He needed prayers. He needed men who pray. He needed his disciples to pray. We need to pray. We also need prayer support. Humble people realize they need help from God and from others. Even St. Paul asked for prayer support. God blesses and empowers the Christian community as they pray in love with and for one another.

The disciples' prayers could've encouraged and strengthened Jesus. But it wasn't only for Jesus' sake. They needed to pray for their own sake, so they would not fall into temptation. What temptation? Satan already got Judas. Would they be next? Could they actually join the opposition? Perhaps. Could they abandon Jesus and stop following him? Yes. Could they engage in the wrong kind of battle and die in the process? Peter almost did, as we shall see.

Jesus said, "The spirit is willing, but the body [flesh] is weak." The word 'willing' can also be translated, 'eager,' as in 'eager to do the right thing.' Our spirit is often eager to do something good, even something great. This is especially true when the Holy Spirit is working within us. When we have a Bible study, we are often inspired to do something for God and his glory. We want to overcome our condition, our situation and our human limitations. The problem is that our human natural desires often block the way and make us spiritual paralytics, spiritual mutes, spiritual blind men. After hearing an inspiring sermon, we resolve to share the gospel with others like a lion. But as time goes by our courage dwindles to the size of a mouse.

What is our problem? Our problem is we do not pray. We do not depend on God. Rather, we live by the flesh, that is, by our own strength, determination, ability, effort and thinking. As long as we rely on ourselves, we are destined to fail. Like Jesus, we must return to the altar of prayer and surrender to God: not as I will, but as you will.

Look at verse 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.'" Jesus already prayed, "not as I will, but as you will." Still, it wasn't enough. Jesus' prayer was not done. The battle was not over. Jesus' prayer was more positive toward obedience this time: "...if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." Jesus was getting stronger and stronger through prayer.

In contrast, Jesus' disciples were getting weaker. Jesus went back again and found them sleeping. They couldn't keep their eyes open. Heavy eyes come from exhaustion and a heavy heart. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. Jesus said nothing to them this time, but went back a third time to pray, saying the same thing. Jesus returned the third time and said, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!" Jesus' battle in prayer was the turning point in his heart, which changed his sorrow to strength. Jesus was ready to be arrested and to die in obedience to the Father's will. It was for our sins and for our salvation.

III. Jesus surrendered for us (47-56)

Just then Judas arrived, leading a large crowd armed with swords and clubs who were sent from the chief priests and elders. Judas had arranged a signal to kiss Jesus and then they would arrest him. Going to Jesus, Judas said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. It is ironic that Judas chose a sign of love to betray Jesus. Yet how could Judas do otherwise, to the One who had done no wrong? How could he betray the One who had done so much good, healing the sick, driving out demons, and raising the dead? Jesus said to Judas, "Friend, do what you came for." So gracious was Jesus not to call down curses on his betrayer, though that is what he deserved. Judas' crime was all the more heinous, and Jesus' love all the more amazing.

The men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. Then one of Jesus' companions drew his sword and struck the chief priest's servant, cutting off his ear. We know this was Peter (Jn 18:10). Peter didn't pray, so he didn't wait for Jesus' direction. He did what he thought he should do: he struck a blow with the sword. But Jesus did not approve. "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword." Jesus' victories never came by way of the sword. Jesus wins by love and the truth. Jesus wins by obedience to God.

Jesus added, "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?" Jesus

could've called in reinforcements from heaven: one legion for himself and one for each of his Eleven apostles. None for Judas. But Jesus wasn't trying to save himself. Jesus was ready to surrender. It was all in God's plan. Jesus said more to the crowd: "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled." Jesus exposed their cowardly deed of darkness. They thought they were wise and well-prepared. But Jesus was doing everything according to God's will as foretold by the prophets. Jesus was betrayed into the hands of sinners. And at that moment, all the other Eleven disciples deserted him and fled, as he had prophesied. It was just as Jesus had said.

"Not as I will, but as you will." "May your will be done." Praise Jesus who took up the task of obeying God's will all by himself. It was to bring us to God. It was to destroy the devil's stronghold on all humanity. May our hope and confidence and strength be in Christ alone. May we learn to pray, "Not as I will, but as you will," and share in the joy and victory that are in Christ Jesus.