



THE DARKEST NIGHT

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 Mark 14:32-42
 40th Message
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A difficult question, and one that I am frequently asked, is, If God is all sovereign and he has predestined everything in life, why bother to pray, since it won't change anything? Sometimes it is skeptics who ask that question, but on occasion it is put by believers in critical situations where there seems no way out, when they face a crippling illness or the death of a loved one.

I have keenly felt some of these tensions. Why do we pray? When our first-born son became ill, a group of friends held an all-night prayer meeting. They prayed, and the boy died. Prior to the birth of our last daughter, a group of forty-eight college students spent twenty-hours praying for her good health, each taking a one half-hour segment of the day. They prayed, and Katie lived. How can we explain this? Confronted by these divine mysteries, I find I am comforted more by stories than by concepts.

In our study in Mark's gospel this morning we will see our Lord in the posture of prayer, wrestling face down in the dust with the same issues. It is the evening of Passover. Jesus has just established the first new covenant meal in the upper room, and he and his disciples have descended down the Kidron valley and entered the garden of Gethsemane. It will be a dark night. In the agony that follows we must never forget that this story is for us, for it not only secured our redemption, but also, "the way of Gethsemane" will in some respects become the "way" for every Christian disciple.

I. Deep Within the Garden of Gethsemane

Mark 14:32-42

And they came to a place named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, "Sit here until I have prayed." And He took with Him Peter and James and John, and began to be very distressed and troubled. And He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death; remain here and keep watch." And He went a little beyond them, and was falling to the ground, and began to pray that if it were possible, the hour might pass Him by. And He was saying, "Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will." And He came and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Keep watching and praying, that you may not come into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." And again He went away and prayed, saying the same words. And again He came and found

them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to answer Him. And He came the third time, and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come; behold, the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Arise, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!" (Mark 14:32-42, NASB)

The name "Gethsemane" is derived from the Hebrew term "*gat shemani*," meaning "press of oils." The garden, located on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives, was planted with groves of olive trees and had numerous olive presses. John records that this was one of Jesus' favorite spots. This was where he liked to withdraw with his disciples (John 18:2). The site is well preserved even today. Actually, a number of olive trees in the grove that are still productive date back to Jesus' day. A thousand years before Christ, King David found himself in Gethsemane. He had left the upper city in forced exile (having just been betrayed by his own son) and descended down the steep slope to cross the brook Kidron. In that dark hour, when David publicly exposed his own humiliation, he was embraced in one of the most beautiful acts of loyalty recorded in Scripture (2 Sam 15:19ff). A thousand years later, Israel's greater David longed for the same acts of loyalty as he was overcome with the prospect of imminent humiliation.

As Jesus entered the garden he left eight of his disciples at the entrance, instructing them to remain there until he had prayed. Then, taking Peter, James and John, the three closest to him, he entered into the deepest recesses of the terrible sanctity of that hour. No longer could he mask his anguish with stern self-control. Overcome with dismay and terror, he confided in the three, hoping to draw strength and comfort from them.

It is difficult to find words to describe what happened to Jesus on this occasion, but Mark reaches for two verbs that are very rare in the New Testament and combines them in the hope that the reader might begin to comprehend the extreme emotions overtaking Jesus at this hour. He records that Jesus was "very distressed and troubled." The first term speaks of being completely overwhelmed with amazement. Our Lord had never experienced anything like this before. The second speaks of extreme distress, which the other gospel writers say pressed in on him so hard that he sweat huge drops of sweat, like blood. One scholar wrote that the two terms "describe an extremely acute emotion, a compound of bewilderment, fear, uncertainty and anxiety,

nowhere else portrayed in such vivid terms as here.”¹ As Jesus drowns in this sea of darkness (perhaps the Greek preposition *peri* attached to the verb suggests the darkness completely surrounded him), the only words he can voice to describe the terror is that he thinks the weight of grief may kill him. This is the anguished echo of the refrain in Psalms 42-43 (cf. Isa 38:1):

“Why are you in despair, O my soul?

And why have you become disturbed within me?”
(Psa 42:5, 11; 43:5)

Drawing on the support of his three closest friends, Jesus asks them to stay close by, within earshot, and remain alert so that they can keep watch for him while he prays undistracted. What an awesome privilege! Wouldn't you have been breathless at the prospect of hearing his every word? The problem for the three disciples, however, was that they had just consumed a large feast, and it was near midnight. Their full stomachs, dull minds and weary bodies would be no match for the dark forces in the air on this night.

As Jesus leaves them there, the weight of the oppression is so great that he cannot walk, and he falls to the ground repeatedly.² Isaiah's words, “crushed for our iniquities” (53:5), appear painfully appropriate. What a pitiful sight: this man who had stood upright his whole life, continually extending his hands to lift others from the trash heap, is without strength to stand at this, the very vortex of evil. The only posture available to him for prayer is face down on the ground.

But from that position he makes his voice heard in heaven. Mark first gives a summary of his request, and then follows with our Lord's exact words. The bottom line is, if there is any way out, Jesus wants out. Does that surprise you? All his life he had obeyed his heavenly Father. The word No had never entered his vocabulary. But not this night. He wanted to be spared from this terrible hour, the hour for which he had lived his entire life. The horror was more than he thought he could bear.

What exactly was the horror? Mark says:

“And He was saying, “Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will.”

In the intimacy of the upper room, Jesus had passed the cup of the new covenant among the disciples. Now we find him “as Son at table with God, who as Father acts as host, passing or taking the cup (cf. Psa 23:5).”³

Jesus' precious words combine extreme, child-like intimacy with supreme theology, gut-wrenching honesty and resolute trust. At this, his darkest hour, he cries out, “Abba,” which is the Aramaic version of our intimate expression, “Daddy.” Jews did not use this term in prayer, but Jesus taught his disciples that it was to be primary in theirs. In that childlike humility he draws on all of God's sovereign power, the God who can do all things, to remove this “cup” from him.

What was this cup that Jesus was asked to drink?⁴ Its contents were usually wine, a symbol of the end product of one's labor. Wine is the ingathering of everything that has been plowed, sowed, watered, pruned, harvested, and finally, fermented. The cup was often described as containing the wrath of God in the Old Testament, which was about to be poured out on the nations in judgment:

In the hand of the Lord is a cup full of foaming wine mixed with spices;

He pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs. (Psa 75:8)

Just one sip from that cup was enough to make one stagger, yet, painfully, Jesus was about to drink it down to the dregs. History was quite clear: one drink from that cup was sufficient to dismantle world superpowers. That had happened with Egypt, Assyria and Babylon, to name some superpowers from the past. Rome would suffer the same fate in the not too distant future. Israel had also tasted her share of that bitter cup. Well did the nation know its potency. But, looking beyond Israel's exile in Babylon, Isaiah saw a new day coming:

“This is what your Sovereign LORD says, your God, who defends his people:

‘See, I have taken out of your hand the cup that made you stagger;

from that cup, the goblet of my wrath, you will never drink again.’” (Isa 51:22)

Someone else would drink that cup and become the sin bearer for his people.

“But the LORD was pleased to crush Him,

He made him sick;

If He would render Himself as a guilt offering.” (Isa 53:10)

In that act of atonement, God's people would then be allowed to drink his cup of forgiveness in a new covenant that led to eternal life. The disciples had just finished drinking that very cup, and now Jesus contemplates drinking this terrible cup of the wrath of God. He is seized with panic at the thought. Yet, having expressed his heart with total honesty, he rests in God's supreme will: “Yet not what I will, but what You will.” The Son will throw himself on the full resources of God's power, crying out for that which he desperately longs, aware that God is a Father who is easily moved by our helpless state. Compassion rules the heart of this Father. Life is terribly negotiable (Gen 18:22-33; 2 Kgs 20:1-7). Knowing this, Jesus tells God not to allow his compassion to sacrifice what is best (contrast Hezekiah's request, 2 Kgs 20:12ff). Jesus will not coerce the Father to violate the supreme best of his will. What agonizing, resolute trust!

Having poured out his agony before the Father, Jesus drags himself out of the dust to check on how his sentries are doing, only to find to his dismay, his watchmen asleep at their posts. His rebuke strikes close to home. Could they not remain alert and watch for but

one hour? Commanding them back to their posts, he explains that it was not only for his benefit that they should be alert and watchful, but their own, too. They must draw near to God in humble prayer lest they become easy targets for the approaching forces of evil. A willing spirit, as was demonstrated in their earlier heroic boasts (14:29ff), by itself is of no avail in the face of temptation. Without dependent prayer that clings to God we will have only the flesh to draw on. In that event it doesn't matter which choice is made, to fight or flee; the ultimate outcome, abject failure, has already been predetermined.

Jesus returns to his prayer chamber near the olive press and once again attempts to break through to God to intervene. His prayer on this occasion is identical with the first, reflecting that God had not moved, and that our Lord still felt inadequate to face the test. Once again he returns to his sworn sentries, and again he finds them sleeping. The heaviness of their eyes suggests that spiritual forces were already at work, enemies that gained easy access through their proud hearts. When Jesus confronts them with this second blatant failure, they are so covered with shame that not even Peter can muster an appropriate excuse.⁵ The scene is repeated a third time, and his disciples are still out stone cold on the ground. The die is cast. Having three times failed to stay alert and watch, Peter will deny the Lord three times.

The next line has proven difficult for translators. It can be taken either as a disappointed question, "Are you sleeping on and resting?" or as an ironic command, "Sleep for the remainder and rest." I prefer the latter interpretation. D. A. Carson sums it up well:

The hour of the Passion is near: it is too late to pray and gain strength for the temptations ahead. His disciples may as well sleep... Doubtless Jesus could see and hear the party approaching as it crossed the Kidron with torches and climbed up the path to Gethsemane. The sleepers for whom he would die have lost their opportunity to gain strength through prayer. By contrast Jesus has prayed in agony but now rises with poise and advances to meet his betrayer.⁶

The fiercest cosmic battle of history had come to an end. Hell had unleashed all its fury, and the Son of Man was left abandoned, alone, pushed to brink of the abyss, tempted to take the forbidden fruit of self-preservation, but he remained faithful. "Not My will, but Thine, not My will, but Thine." "The Lord has always reserved Himself for this hour, and had now finally embraced the Divine Will concerning it."⁷ The Lord's darkest night became the beginning of the cosmic new creation.

What fruit can we glean in this most holy garden of Gethsemane?

II. Gethsemane, the Holiest Ground

A. Gethsemane: Where we come to know and love the Son

This was the darkest night in Jesus' life, the darkest night in all of history, the night when all the vile forces of evil were unleashed upon the Son to tempt him to fight or flee. This was the night when Jesus was most vulnerable, when everything within his being cried out to do anything but drink that cup. This was the night that crushed his soul and removed all the known boundaries for coping. This was the night when he cried out for intimate company, the night when he could be known in weakness and draw on the strength and support of others, yet he was left utterly alone, face down on the ground. Only his repeated cries of agonized prayer lifted him out of the darkest suicidal pit. This was the epoch-making night when, as the author of Hebrews wrote, "although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things, which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation, being designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek" (Heb 5:8-10). On this night we come to know and love the Son at the deepest level for, in not forsaking the highest good, he did not forsake us. "For the joy set before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb 12:2). The vision of us at the Messianic banquet table was what enabled him to endure (Ps 22:25ff; 102:18). On this night he was perfected as our high priest. Why do we pray? That we might draw near to Someone who infinitely understands.

We learn to know the Son in Gethsemane, and there too we learn to understand the way of the cup.

B. Gethsemane: Where we come to understand the way of the cup

Why did Jesus stay in the garden?⁸ Surely there were other ways to inaugurate the kingdom, ways that were more popular and less painful. There was the way of the sword: fighting evil with force, like the zealots and the Pharisees. Given Jesus' popularity, it would not have been difficult to impose the kingdom of God on Israel's relentless foes. And even if that met with failure, there was a lot less shame and humiliation dying that kind of martyr's death than what he was about to endure. The Jews repeatedly chose that way. If force seemed ill advised, then Jesus could have chosen the second way, that of the Essenes, withdrawing from the world into the quietness of the desert to cultivate personal piety and hope. Abandon the world until God fights the great cosmic battle, then return and stake your claim when the revolution is complete. Fight or flee, Masada or Qumran: these were the two established ways of bringing in the kingdom. Sadly, they remain the most common temptations to which the church has succumbed for centuries.

Gethsemane shows a third way, however, the only true way to combat evil: head straight into the center of the world's darkness and drink the cup. In one sense, we will never have to drink it, because Jesus drank it dry down to the dregs to secure our redemption. His work of atonement was finished once and for all. That is

why we will never have to drink this cup. The cup we drink is the cup of the new covenant of forgiveness and new life.

But, on the other hand, Jesus did say to John, "Can you drink this cup?...The cup I drink you shall drink" (10:38,39). In order to offer the gift of forgiveness and life to the world we will in some mysterious way drink from this cup, too. As Christ's ambassadors we must enter into the world, travel to the core of its evil and then swallow the hurt. We must forgive the emotional damage left by others in their wake. In this way we enter into the fellowship of Christ's suffering. And the more we have been hurt, the more potential we have to offer the gifts of life and healing to the world. That is a hard pill to swallow. But, the "way of Gethsemane" is not an option, it is our calling. Can you forgive? Can you swallow the emotional pain others have caused or are about to cause you? That is the way of Gethsemane. On the one hand it is a horrible cup to drink, but on the other, it is the most wonderful gift we can offer to a broken world.

C. Gethsemane: Where we come to understand our greatest weakness

The third thing we discover about Gethsemane is what it does to us. If we choose to go that way, the way into prayer and fasting, into betrayal and suffering, into swallowing the emotional damage others have done to us, and not demand justice, we discover that it will not be an easy way. Tom Wright explains that the prospect of being consumed by evil will lead us,

into the ambiguous and agonizing position of wrestling with the purposes of God, into knowing that we might have got it wrong, into wondering in anguish if maybe there's a different way after all, into being misunderstood by friends and family, into fightings without and fears within...Do not imagine that because you find yourself in turmoil, struggling with turbulent fear and uncertainty, this means you have come the wrong way or arrived at the wrong place. The idea that Christians should always have nothing but inner peace and tranquillity is at best a half-truth, at worst a romantic or existentialist betrayal of the Jesus of Gethsemane.⁹

So if you find yourself in Gethsemane, you are not in the wrong place, you are in the right place.

Finally, in Gethsemane we learn how to pray and the real power of prayer.

D. Gethsemane: Where we learn the real power of prayer

Why should we bother to pray? In prayer, on our knees, we learn that the real battles are confronted before we ever encounter evil face to face. Simple, honest, dependent prayer strengthens the soul. Rising from his knees, Jesus knew he could face his betrayer, the trial, the false accusations, the mockery, the spitting, the beatings, the spilling of his blood, and the final hours of abandonment on the tree. Prayer had not changed the Father's highest good, or his resolve, but it had changed the Son and strengthened him with the steady, supernatural resolve to save us from of sins. Will you follow? Pray Gethsemane.

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you. Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. To Him be dominion forever and ever. (1 Pet 5:6-11)

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1. R. G. Bratcher R. G. and E. A. Nida, *Translator's Handbook on Mark* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1961) 446.

2. "was falling down" – the imperfect tense suggests repeated, continuous action.

3. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 869.

4. On the Old Testament use of the "cup" see Job 21:20; Psa 11:6; 60:3; 75:7-8; Isa 51:19, 22; 63:6; Jer 25:15-16, 27-29; 49:12; 51:57; Lam 4:21; Ezek 23:31-34; Hab 2:16; Zech 12:2.

5. See Peter's own confessional about the need for humility in resisting temptation in 1 Pet 5:6-11.

6. D.A. Carson, "Matthew," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 545.

7. H.B. Swete, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London, 1927) 349.

8. For this discussion I have been greatly helped by Tom Wright's chapter, "The Way to Gethsemane," in his outstanding little book, *The Way of the Lord: Christian Pilgrimage Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 81-90.

9. Wright, 87, 89.