

Sermon Series:

# Prayers of the Bible



## **JESUS IN GETHSEMANE – Matthew 26:36-46**

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I would encourage you to read the wider context of this event which you can find in Matthew 26:30-75. This will help you to better understand Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane which is at the centre of our sermon today.

As we approach the cross, we become aware that the intensity is ramping up – in the situation and in the individuals involved. Can you think of a time when you felt this kind of intensity? When you felt like you might collapse under the anxiety and stress? Of course, some of us are more sensitive to our environment and are more affected by the tension. Others of us are pretty laid back and nothing seems to get us uptight. However, I think this situation would have affected everyone, no matter their personality.

As we look at these events, however, we can see differences – in what people did with what was happening. I think Matthew has written his account in such a way as to set up a comparison between Jesus and Peter. I'd like to walk through the events of that night before the crucifixion and compare what they did.

### **Comparison – Jesus & Peter**

*Jesus knowing; Peter denying.* Jesus is going into these events with His eyes wide open, knowing the full extent of what they will demand of Him. He shares this information with His disciples – at least on the level that will be understandable for them. But Peter rejects Jesus' words, refusing to accept that Jesus must die or that he could betray Jesus. These statements do not fit into his view of the Messiah or of himself. His pride blinds him to his own heart.

*Jesus grieving; Peter grieving.* Jesus is not afraid to acknowledge that the coming hours will be difficult. He tells his disciples that *“My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death”*. (v. 38) This is not fear of what will happen, but an honest expression of the physical, emotional and spiritual pain that He is beginning to carry. Sometimes, depictions of Jesus' death focus on the physical pain of the flogging and crucifixion. While I would never diminish this, I think it misses the point – the real pain for Jesus was in carrying the weight of our sin and God's wrath against it. He grieves at the destructiveness of sin and it the weight of it is crushing. Although the disciples cannot possibly understand what is happening, they too are touched

by Jesus' pain. Luke tells us that the disciples are "*exhausted from grief*". (Luke 22:45) Although Peter refuses to believe that events will unfold as Jesus has said, he loves Jesus and grieves with Him.

*Jesus anguishing; Peter sleeping.* In the face of His grief, Jesus asks the disciples to watch and pray with Him. However, exhausted by what He cannot understand, Peter and the other disciples fall asleep, leaving Jesus all alone. Except He isn't alone. Weeping, He pours out His heart to His Father. Luke tells us that the physical effort involved was so extreme that "*his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.*" (Luke 22:40-46)

*Jesus asking; Peter sleeping - still.* Jesus, increasingly aware of the depth of suffering awaiting Him, asks the Father if there is any other way salvation can be accomplished. He is not refusing to obey, just asking if there is any alternative. He is talking through the pain with His Father. He doesn't pretend everything is easy, He doesn't sugar-coat the pain. He is honest, but remains open to the Father.

*Jesus submitting; Peter resisting.* In working through His pain with God, Jesus comes to place of accepting that this is the only way, and He whole-heartedly submits to the Father's will. He affirms His desire to do what God has sent Him to do, saying, "*I want your will to be done*" (v. 39) When He is approached in the Garden by Judas and the soldiers, He doesn't resist. He voluntarily submits, even though he could have asked His Father to send thousands of angels to protect Him (v. 53) Peter, however, is still resisting what is happening. John's Gospel tells us that it was Peter who pulled out his sword and slashed off the High Priest's slave's ear. (John 18:10)

*Jesus trusting leading to VICTORY; Peter fearing leading to FAILURE.* Once Jesus has sorted things out with His Father and His submission to God's will is affirmed, He is able to go forward with confidence and peace - no one is able to provoke Him to anger or doubt or fear. As you read the account of His trial before the High Priest, you can't help but feel that the High Priest is the one on trial, not Jesus! Jesus goes willingly and purposefully to His death and victory is won – not without anguish, but without doubt and fear. Sin is overcome through the voluntary sacrifice of Jesus.

On the other hand, Peter runs away in fear and when he does slip back to see what is happening, He denies His relationship with Jesus when questioned. Peter finally sees himself as God sees him and realises his failure to stay true to Jesus. He comes face to face with his own weakness and sinfulness and is overwhelmed with shame and remorse.

### **Jesus' prayer**

In Jesus and Peter, we see two very different trajectories through this time. What made the difference? It is not that Jesus was God and therefore this was easy for Him. The Gospel writers make it clear that it wasn't easy for Him. Yes, Jesus was never less than God, but in His life here on earth, He chose to live as never more than a man, and as such He lived in complete dependence on His Father. As I look at what happened, I think the big difference comes as Jesus is praying and working through the situation with His Father. This time in prayer made possible all that came afterward.

As we look at Jesus' first prayer (v. 39), we are struck immediately with its intimacy as He cries out "*My Father!*". It is a close and trusting relationship. Jesus doesn't come demanding

anything, but as the weight on His shoulders grows greater, He asks a question – is there any other way? *“If it is possible let this cup of suffering be taken away from me.”* The *“cup of suffering”* is referred to in the Old Testament as the cup of God’s wrath – the pouring out of just punishment for sin. For Jesus to take the punishment for the sin of all humanity it will involve a many-faceted suffering. There will be the physical pain of crucifixion and death; the spiritual pain of carrying our sin and its punishment; and the emotional pain of separation from His Father and even His earthly friends. Jesus is not afraid of what was going to happen, but He knows the suffering will be immense. He doesn’t pretend it will be easy or not be painful!

But in spite of the very real suffering He is facing, Jesus says, *“Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.”* Jesus is not reluctant to do God’s will. God is not sacrificing Jesus, Jesus is voluntarily sacrificing Himself for our sakes. He is not objecting to God’s plan, just being honest with His Father that the process to get to the desired end is daunting and He is seeking assurance and support in these final hours.

And if Jesus needed this, how much more do we! This is what Jesus talks to Peter about:

*Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the spirit is willing, but the body is weak! (v. 41)*

Victory in any situation does not come as a matter of course no matter how much you want to do the right thing. Temptation is greater than us – only God can overcome it.

After seeing that His disciples have failed to keep watch with Him, Jesus returns to God in prayer. (v. 42) Once again He cries out *“My Father!”* The relationship is still strong – suffering will not separate Him from God or divert Him from the goal. *“If this cup cannot be taken away unless I drink it, your will be done”* God’s wrath against sin must be satisfied if humanity’s relationship with God is to be restored. If this is the only way it can happen, then Jesus is willing. His desire for this outcome is greater than any desire to avoid suffering. How great is His love for us! How great is His love for and trust in His Father!

In Luke’s account, we are told that *“an angel from heaven appeared and strengthened him.”* (Luke 22:43) Jesus was not alone, not without help from His Father to face the future. Jesus then returns to His disciples and rouses them from their sleep. *“... the time has come ... Up, let’s be going.”* (v. 45) The decision is made, and Jesus is moving forward in absolute trust in His Father.

### **How should we pray?**

I think there are a couple of things we can learn from Jesus’ prayer.

1. **We can be a real support to others by praying for them.** We often think, “All I can do is pray”. But if Jesus asked His disciples to pray for Him, then we can know that our prayers make a real difference. If we really believed this, I think we would be more diligent in our prayers for others.
2. **We can speak honestly with God about our struggles.** Even before we come to Him, He knows and understands our situation and our weaknesses. But He wants us to admit our fears and needs to Him because then He can help us. He prefers honest tears to false bravado. He wants us to work through things with Him.

3. **Our goal in prayer is not to convince God to bend to our will but to discover His will and submit to it.** This is one of the areas God has been working on in my life recently. So often we go to God with our list of requests and are disappointed when He doesn't answer them as we would like. Far too many preachers have made millions from this approach by promising us that if we follow their prayer formula (and give to their ministry!) God will give us whatever we ask. We beg and plead for God to do our will, but how often do we ask Him what His will is? How often do we commit ourselves to doing His will even if it is a hard and painful road? I am finding that this is changing the way I think about prayer and its role in my relationship with God. I'm learning – slowly – to say with Jesus, *"I want your will to be done, not mine"*.

### **Our Hope**

Finally, I think these events give us some real hope. As we submit to God's will, He will be with us, enabling us to do His will with confidence and peace. This doesn't mean that it will be easy, but it will be possible. And in the midst of the hardest times, we can always pour out our hearts to God and find there His love and comfort. Because Jesus knew separation from God as He carried our sin, we will never need to know that separation. He is with us always.

Peter failed pretty spectacularly! But that was not the end of the story. Because Jesus did not fail in His obedience to God and did not turn back from the cross, He could bring forgiveness, healing, and restoration to Peter. Jesus' victory over sin was greater than Peter's failure. Not only was the past forgiven, but Peter's future was not limited by what had happened. Jesus specialises in second chances! After Easter we are going to look at how the early church – including Peter – handled a difficult situation with prayer. Peter learned through his failure, and we can too.

As we close, let's remember the song that Jesus and His disciples would have sung on their way to the Garden of Gethsemane. I pray that it is a song you can sing too.

*When hard pressed, I cried to the LORD;  
he brought me into a spacious place.  
The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid.  
What can mere mortals do to me?  
The LORD is with me; he is my helper.  
I look in triumph on my enemies.  
It is better to take refuge in the LORD  
than to trust in humans.  
The LORD is my strength and my defence;  
he has become my salvation.  
(Psalm 118:5-8,14 NLT)*