

WD March 18, 2024

“Prayer By the Oil Press”

Perhaps one of the most intense moments in Jesus’ ministry happens in the Garden of Gethsemane. We had seen Jesus pray before. He once spent all night praying over the selection of his disciples in Luke 5:12-16. Such a big decision literally shaped the church that followed Pentecost. If we are making big decisions, we may not pray all night, but we do have an invitation to go to the Lord with those big decisions and pray as long as it takes. When I received the call to be pastor at Grace I prayed for weeks over it. Jesus was also known to go off by Himself and pray in private. In Mark 1:35 Jesus gets up before the sunrise to pray away from the crowd. From this prayer Jesus determined to share the Gospel in other places. The point is simple; Jesus never missed an opportunity to pray. The most noted place is in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Mark 14:32-34 tells us, ³²“They (Jesus and the disciples) went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Sit here while I pray.’” ³³“He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. ³⁴“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them. “Stay here and keep watch.”

First, of all let’s take note of the location. Gethsemane is a word made up of two Hebrew words “Gat Shemani,” which literally means “Olive Press.” In fact, genuine olive oil is still pressed each year from the fruit of those ancient and gnarled olive trees growing in the Garden of Gethsemane today. The trees however, are not original to Jesus’ day because the Romans burned them all in 70 AD. Needless, to say this was Jesus’ favorite place in town to pray and because it was well-known to be Jesus’ favorite Judas knew right were to find Him. Still, this is where we find Jesus praying His most anguished prayer carefully selected as the starting point for the events on Good Friday. It was so intense that Luke 22 tells us that he sweat blood. It is in this very select location that communicates to us the importance of finding our own place to pray. If we don’t have a garden, perhaps we have a “war room” a phrase made famous by the movie. Wherever our Gethsemane may be, think of it as the place where you may commune with the Lord in prayer.

As second thought. Whenever Jesus was faced with the deepest of emotions, He made it a special point to pray. Here in Gethsemane we are told that Jesus is “deeply distressed and troubled.” The words are ekthambeisthai (deeply distressed) denotes a state of shuddering horror in the face of the dreadful prospect before Him. And ademnein (troubled) is an anxiety from which there is no escaping and of which there is no help or comfort. This makes Jesus “exceedingly sorrowful even to the point of death.” We remember that Jesus is facing the cup of God’s wrath, the punishment for sin. Jesus would have to be the suffering servant before becoming the victorious servant of Isaiah 52:13-53:12. Thankfully, it would be a weight upon His shoulders that we will never have to endure.

Perhaps we have had our own real lows; exceedingly sorrowful to the point of death experiences. Perhaps, our world has become numb from the overload of trouble or sorrow. When such moments invade our lives, I encourage you to notice how much Jesus keeps leaning into His Father in heaven.

“Not my will be done but yours, Father.” Jesus is sweating blood while doing this. This is rare but only happens under intense stress. Yet, notice that Jesus starts off with “Everything is possible with You” in Mark 14:36. What’s possible is that in our own intense moments our Father will also see to it that we are sustained. Jesus went in knowing the Father’s Will but still struggled with the moment. We may have to search for our Father’s will and ask for courage to accept it and sometimes that may take more than one visit in prayer. Yet, note even while on the cross Jesus kept praying to the Father. “Father forgive them...” “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” He never allowed the circumstances to separate Him from the Father but continually kept praying. As people of faith, we can expect that we are not immune to such moments like the one in Gethsemane. And when they come, we may do as Jesus, crying out to our Father. Thankfully, in Jesus we know our prayers already begin with the reassurance that Jesus has already taken the heaviest burden of our sin. In other words, we have a head start on our deepest cries to the Lord.

Paul, who endured the heaviest trouble of all the disciples wrote from his prison in Rome about how much God is for us. Romans 8:31-32: “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” The logic of Paul’s argument is one I am trying to make with prayer. If Jesus goes the distance to die on a cross it makes

no sense that Jesus would not meet us in our prayers and then give us what is needed to sustain us in our own troubles and sorrows. The Father didn't take the cross away from Jesus but He did give Jesus what is needed for it. Likewise, we may not have our cross taken away either but will have the grace to endure it. Sometimes only God knows how that even works at all. The lesson of Gethsemane is to trust our Father in heaven as Jesus had done. Keep the conversation going.

One last thing worthy of mention today is how Jesus' prayer in the Garden prepared Him for what was next. Three times Jesus prayed. When He was finished, He was determined to carry on, to follow through on what He was praying for. In the midst of the faint light of the torches, Judas shows up with Roman thugs, betrays Jesus with a kiss and then is ushered off. Disciples suddenly awaken to an adrenaline rush of fear and anxiety. They rally to Jesus, even try to defend Jesus, Peter cutting off Malchus' ear, eventually everyone running away.

I wonder if Judas was the last one standing in the garden that night. The disciples were gone. Soldiers no longer needed him. Just the quiet tortured guilt building within him all alone in the Garden with his thirty silver pieces. I wonder if that is when his shame hits him.

After that prayer in the Garden Jesus carries on. One foot in front of the other. Sometimes just one more thing is all we have the energy for. Prayer sets up the change for that one more thing. Prayer prepares us. Martin Luther has been noted for saying, "I have so much to do today that I will be three hours in prayer." He has also been noted for saying, "To be Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing." Luther, who suffered with bouts of depression depended on prayer regularly.

Jesus made prayer a part of life. He made it a point to have a conversation everyday with His Father in Heaven. All of that prayer perhaps made Gethsemane a lot more helpful to Jesus. Perhaps we too could pray as Jesus with the same confidence and devotion expressed at Gethsemane. My hope is that as we approach Holy Week (next week) we take advantage of it as a time for prayer, as a chance to lean into the Lord just a little bit more. Perhaps in so doing we are just a little stronger, a little more aware, have a little bit more strength, get a little bit more courage, find a little bit more humility, or receive a little bit more of whatever we need. The Lord will know. May the Lord bless your conversations with Him.

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John 3:30