

The Gospel of Matthew, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 34: Gethsemane and the Arrest

Matthew 26:36–56

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Gethsemane is one of the most doctrinally rich and emotionally raw scenes in all of Scripture, and the two cannot be separated. What is at stake here is the true humanity of Jesus and the reality of His submission to the Father. Matthew refuses to give us a Savior who floats above suffering untouched. Jesus is “sorrowful and troubled,” His soul “very sorrowful, even to death.” He genuinely shrinks from the cup, and He genuinely surrenders to His Father’s will. This is no performance; it is the real agony of the real God-man, who, as Hebrews says, offered up prayers with loud cries and tears and learned obedience through what He suffered. If your students leave thinking Jesus’ obedience cost Him nothing, they have missed the heart of the cross. And at the arrest, the same truth shines: He could summon twelve legions of angels and refuses, because the Father’s saving plan, foretold by the prophets, must be fulfilled.

But this passage is also relentlessly practical. Jesus models for every disciple how to face the worst that life can bring: not by denial, not by numbing, not by clenched-teeth stoicism, but by honest, surrendered prayer. He shows us what to do with anguish, take it to the Father. He shows us the difference between His watchful prayer and the disciples’ drowsy weakness. He shows us when to put the sword away and trust the Father instead. Your students are all facing some Gethsemane of their own, some cup they would give anything to avoid, and this scene hands them the pattern of faithful surrender.

So teach for both the head and the heart. Help your class marvel at a Savior who was fully human and fully submitted, who felt the full weight of the cross and chose it anyway for them. Then lead them, tenderly, to learn His prayer, ‘not as I will, but as you will,’ and to bring their own hardest surrenders to the Father who can be trusted even when the cup will not pass.

Question 1

Student Question:

Matthew shows Jesus “sorrowful and troubled” and saying, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death” (vv. 37–38). What does the depth of Jesus’ anguish in Gethsemane teach us about the reality of His suffering and what it cost Him to go to the cross?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by letting the words land without softening them. Matthew tells us Jesus “began to be sorrowful and troubled” (v. 37), and then Jesus Himself says, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death” (v. 38). The Greek words are strong, conveying distress, anguish, and a heaviness that

presses toward the breaking point. Luke adds that His sweat became like drops of blood (Luke 22:44). This is the deepest distress recorded of Jesus anywhere in the Gospels.

Help students resist two errors. The first is to imagine that Jesus, being divine, did not really suffer, that He merely went through the motions. Scripture will not allow it. His sorrow was real, His dread was real, His agony was real. The second error is to think that this distress was a failure of faith. It was not. Jesus is showing us that profound anguish and perfect faithfulness can live in the same heart at the same time.

Ask what it was that pressed so hard upon Him. It was not merely the prospect of physical pain, terrible as crucifixion was. It was the cup: the weight of bearing the sin of the world and drinking down the judgment we deserved. Hebrews 5:7 says He offered up prayers “with loud cries and tears.” The sinless Son was about to be made sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21), and His soul recoiled from it.

This is deeply pastoral. Because Jesus suffered so deeply, He is able to sympathize with us in our weakness (Hebrews 4:15). Our Savior is not a stranger to anguish. When your students find themselves crushed by grief or fear, they can know that the One they follow has been to the bottom of sorrow before them, and came through faithful.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The genuine humanity of Jesus, who truly suffered and felt anguish (Hebrews 2:14–18)
- The reality of what the cross cost: bearing sin and divine judgment, not merely physical pain
- Deep distress and perfect faithfulness coexisting in the same heart
- Christ as the sympathetic High Priest who has known our sorrows (Hebrews 4:15)
- The sinlessness of Christ even in His agony (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Discussion Prompts

- How does it change your view of Jesus to see Him this vulnerable and distressed?
- What comfort is there in knowing your Savior has been to the depths of sorrow?
- Why is it important that Jesus’ anguish was real and not merely apparent?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jesus brought His sorrow honestly to His Father instead of hiding it or running from it. When you are crushed by grief or fear, do you tend to bury it, distract yourself, or bring it to God in prayer, and what would change if you brought it to Him as openly as Jesus did?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question follows directly from Jesus’ example. Notice what He does with His distress: He does not deny it, He does not run from it, and He does not let it crush Him into

despair. He takes it straight to His Father. He falls on His face and pours out His soul (v. 39). The most honest prayer in Scripture comes from the lips of the sinless Son.

Help students see the options we usually choose instead. When sorrow or fear presses on us, many of us bury it, telling ourselves and others that we are fine. Others numb it with distraction, with busyness, with the screen, with whatever keeps the feeling at bay. Still others let it spiral into hopelessness. Gethsemane shows a better way: bring it, all of it, to God.

Notice that Jesus' honesty before the Father is not irreverence; it is intimacy. He says exactly what He feels and exactly what He wants, and then yields to the Father's will. There is room at God's throne for our raw honesty. The Psalms are full of it. God is not fragile, and He is not put off by our tears.

Encourage students to name how they actually handle anguish. Then invite them to practice Jesus' pattern: to bring the real thing to God rather than the polished version, trusting that He can be trusted with the truth. The first step toward surrender is honest prayer.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest, raw prayer as a mark of intimacy with God, not irreverence (Psalm 62:8)
- Bringing our distress to God rather than burying or numbing it
- The example of Jesus and the Psalms in praying our true sorrow to God
- God's welcome of His children's honesty, not their performance

Discussion Prompts

- When you are crushed, what is your default: bury it, distract yourself, or pray?
- What would it look like to bring God the real, unpolished version of your struggle?
- What keeps you from praying as honestly as Jesus did in the garden?

Question 3

Student Question:

Three times Jesus prays, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (v. 39). What does this prayer reveal about the relationship between honest asking and true submission to God's will?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now focus on the prayer itself, the very center of the scene: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (v. 39). Read it slowly, because both halves matter, and most of us are tempted to keep only one. The first half is honest petition; the second is total surrender. Jesus holds them together perfectly.

Help students see that submission to God's will does not mean pretending we have no desires. Jesus genuinely asked for another way. He prayed it three times (vv. 39, 42, 44). It is not unspiritual to ask God to remove the cup; Jesus did. Real prayer includes telling God what we long for, even pleading for it.

But notice where the asking lands. Every petition ends in surrender: "nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." The second time He prays, "if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done" (v. 42). The asking is real, and the yielding is deeper still. Jesus wants the Father's will more than He wants His own relief. That is the anatomy of faithful prayer.

This is profoundly freeing for your students. They do not have to choose between honesty and obedience. They can pour out their true desires and still say, and mean, 'your will be done.' Surrender is not the absence of struggle; it is the choice, in the middle of struggle, to trust the Father's will above our own. Jesus shows us it can be done, because He did it for us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The union of honest petition and full surrender in faithful prayer (Matthew 26:39)
- Submission to God's will as trust, not the denial of our true desires
- 'Your will be done' as the deepest posture of prayer (Matthew 6:10)
- Jesus learning obedience through what He suffered (Hebrews 5:8)

Discussion Prompts

- Which half of Jesus' prayer is harder for you, the honest asking or the surrender?
- What would it mean to truly pray 'not as I will, but as you will' about your hardest situation?
- How does Jesus' example free you to be both honest and obedient in prayer?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jesus asked His friends to "watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation," and warned that "the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (v. 41). Where is your own flesh weak right now, and what would faithful watching and praying look like in that specific area this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Turn now to the sleeping disciples. Three times Jesus comes back to find Peter, James, and John asleep while He agonizes in prayer (vv. 40, 43, 45). To Peter He says, "So, could you not watch with me one hour?" and then gives the warning every disciple needs: "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (v. 41).

Be careful not to be harsh with the disciples; Luke tells us they were "sleeping for sorrow" (Luke 22:45). Grief itself exhausted them. The point is not that they were wicked but that they were

weak, and weakness left unguarded leaves us exposed. Jesus is not condemning them; He is warning them, and us, about the gap between willing spirits and weak flesh.

Draw out the two tools Jesus prescribes: watch and pray. To watch is to stay spiritually alert, to be honest about where we are vulnerable, and to refuse to drift on autopilot. To pray is to draw on a strength beyond our own. The disciples slept and then failed; had they watched and prayed, they might have stood. The hours before our temptations are decided largely by whether we are awake and praying in advance.

Press this toward the specific. Ask students to name where their flesh is weak right now, the recurring temptation, the relationship, the pressure point. Then ask what watching and praying would concretely look like there this week. The aim is not vague vigilance but practical, prayerful alertness in the exact places we are most likely to fall.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gap between a willing spirit and weak flesh (Matthew 26:41)
- Watchfulness and prayer as God's appointed guards against temptation (1 Peter 5:8)
- Weakness, when unguarded, as the doorway to temptation
- Spiritual battles often decided before they begin, in prayer and alertness

Discussion Prompts

- Where is your flesh weakest right now, even when your spirit is willing?
- What would 'watching and praying' look like specifically in that area this week?
- How can staying spiritually alert help you before temptation arrives, not just during it?

Question 5

Student Question:

When Peter draws his sword, Jesus says, "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" (v. 53). What does this tell us about why Jesus went to the cross, and about the kind of power He chose not to use?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now move to the arrest. Judas arrives with a crowd, and the sign of betrayal is a kiss (vv. 48–49). In the confusion, one of the disciples, John names him as Peter, draws a sword and strikes the high priest's servant, cutting off his ear. Jesus stops him at once: "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (v. 52). And then comes the staggering statement.

"Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" (v. 53). A legion was about six thousand soldiers; twelve legions would be more than seventy thousand angels, and these are heaven's angels, of whom a single one once

struck down an entire army (2 Kings 19:35). Jesus is saying He is not helpless. He is not being overpowered. With one word He could summon armies that would scatter this mob like dust.

And He does not. Help students feel the weight of this restraint. Jesus is not arrested because He is weak; He is arrested because He is willing. He goes to the cross not because He cannot escape but because He will not. The power was His to call, and for love of us He left it unused. As He asks, "How then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" (v. 54).

This reveals the kind of King and the kind of power Jesus chose. The world saves itself by force, by the sword, by overpowering its enemies. Jesus saves the world by laying down His life. The legions stayed in heaven so that we could be redeemed. There is no greater demonstration that the cross was chosen, not suffered helplessly.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The voluntary nature of Christ's arrest and death: willing, not overpowered (John 10:18)
- The power Jesus refused to use: twelve legions of angels at His command (v. 53)
- The Scriptures fulfilled by Jesus' submission rather than His escape (v. 54)
- The kingdom of Christ advancing by sacrificial love, not the sword (John 18:36)
- Restraint of divine power as the proof of redeeming love

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to you that Jesus could have escaped but chose the cross?
- How does Jesus' refusal of the sword reshape your idea of true power?
- Where are you tempted to 'take up the sword' instead of trusting God's way?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jesus refused to be rescued by force and accepted the cup the Father had given Him. Where in your life are you reaching for your own 'sword,' trying to force an outcome, when God may be calling you to trust and surrender instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question builds on Peter's sword. When pressure came, Peter's instinct was to seize control, to force the outcome by his own strength and his own weapon. It looked like courage, and in a way it was, but it was courage aimed in the wrong direction, trying to rescue what God intended to surrender.

We all have our swords. When a situation frightens us or threatens what we love, we reach for whatever gives us a sense of control: manipulation, anger, frantic effort, manufacturing our own escape. Sometimes the most spiritual-looking activity is really just our refusal to trust God with an outcome we cannot control.

Help students discern the difference between faithful action and fleshly force. There are times to act, and Scripture never commends passivity as a virtue. But there are times when our striving is actually resistance to God's will, our attempt to keep a cup from passing to our lips that the Father has handed us. Jesus shows us when to put the sword away.

Invite honest reflection. Where are you forcing an outcome right now? What 'sword' are you gripping, a hard word you keep ready, a plan to manipulate, a refusal to let go? And what would it look like to set it down and pray, as Jesus did, 'not as I will, but as you will'? Surrender is not passivity; it is trusting the Father enough to stop grasping.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to seize control rather than trust God's will
- The difference between faithful action and fleshly force
- Surrender as active trust, not mere passivity (Psalm 37:5-7)
- Laying down our 'swords' as an act of faith in God's sovereignty

Discussion Prompts

- What 'sword' are you currently gripping to force an outcome you fear losing?
- How do you tell the difference between faithful action and fleshly control?
- What would it look like to set that sword down and trust God this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus says all this is happening "that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled" (v. 56), even as He is betrayed and arrested. How do we see God's sovereignty over the cross at work in this scene, and how is that different from saying God merely allowed it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question draws out the thread of God's sovereignty woven all through the scene. Even in the chaos of betrayal and arrest, Jesus keeps interpreting the events: this is happening so "that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled" (v. 56). The cup, the betrayal, the arrest, the scattering, all of it was foretold, and all of it is unfolding under the Father's hand.

Help students distinguish God's sovereignty from mere permission. It is not that God reluctantly allowed wicked men to do their worst and then made the best of it. The cross was His plan from before the foundation of the world (Acts 2:23; 1 Peter 1:20). The same prophets who foretold the suffering Servant declared, "it was the will of the Lord to crush him" (Isaiah 53:10). God was not improvising; He was accomplishing.

At the same time, guard against the error of erasing human guilt. Judas was responsible for his betrayal; the leaders were responsible for their plot; the soldiers were responsible for their

violence. Scripture holds both truths without flinching: men acted freely and wickedly, and God worked His sovereign saving purpose through their actions. The mystery is real, but the comfort is greater.

This is enormously steadying for believers. If God could take the single worst act in human history, the murder of His own sinless Son, and make it the means of the world's salvation, then there is no situation so dark that He cannot weave it into His good purposes. The cross is the proof that God reigns even when evil seems to be winning.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's sovereignty over the cross as plan, not mere permission (Acts 2:23; Isaiah 53:10)
- Prophecy fulfilled even through human betrayal and violence (v. 56)
- Human responsibility and divine sovereignty held together without contradiction
- God bringing the greatest good out of the greatest evil
- The reign of God over history as the ground of the believer's confidence

Discussion Prompts

- How is God's sovereignty over the cross different from merely allowing it?
- How does it steady you to know God can work His purpose even through evil?
- Where do you need to trust that God reigns even when things look out of control?

Question 8

Student Question:

The disciples who had sworn loyalty "left him and fled" (v. 56) the moment things turned dangerous. When has fear made you fall silent or pull back from following Jesus, and what does this scene stir in you about that?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The scene ends with a quiet heartbreak: "Then all the disciples left him and fled" (v. 56). These were the men who, only hours earlier, had sworn they would die with Him. When the torches and swords appeared, their courage evaporated and they ran into the dark. The Shepherd was struck, and the sheep scattered, exactly as Jesus had foretold.

Be tender here, because every honest believer recognizes himself in this scene. Fear has a way of silencing us and pulling us back. We may not literally flee, but we go quiet when faith would be costly, we change the subject, we hide our allegiance, we keep our heads down when standing up would draw attention. The disciples' flight is not a distant failure; it is a mirror.

Help students name the moments where fear has made them pull back from following Jesus: a conversation where they stayed silent, a stand they did not take, a relationship where they hid

their faith, a temptation they did not resist because resisting felt too hard. The aim is not to wallow in shame but to be honest, because honesty is the doorway to grace.

And let the hope in the larger story shine through. These same men who fled would, after the resurrection, become bold witnesses who turned the world upside down. Their flight was not the end of their story, because Jesus had already planned their restoration (v. 32). The same grace that gathered the scattered disciples is available to everyone in the room who has ever run.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The power of fear to silence and scatter even devoted disciples
- Honest acknowledgment of our failures as the doorway to grace
- The Shepherd struck and the sheep scattered, fulfilling prophecy (v. 56; Zechariah 13:7)
- Restoration and boldness available to those who have fallen back in fear

Discussion Prompts

- When has fear made you fall silent or pull back from following Jesus?
- What makes it costly for you to stand with Christ in your circumstances?
- How does it encourage you that these same disciples later became bold witnesses?

Question 9

Student Question:

Gethsemane shows Jesus in real agony yet praying, “Not as I will, but as you will,” and then willingly accepting arrest because the Father had ordained it. What does this passage teach us about Jesus’ true humanity, His genuine submission to the Father, and God’s sovereign purpose accomplished through the cross?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson, and it gathers up the whole scene. Gethsemane and the arrest hold together three great truths about Jesus, and your students need all three. First, His true humanity. Jesus is not pretending to suffer; His soul is “very sorrowful, even to death,” His sweat falls like blood, He offers prayers “with loud cries and tears” (Hebrews 5:7). He is fully God, yet here we see Him fully man, shrinking from the cup with everything in Him. A Savior who did not really suffer could not really save us, for He must be one of us to stand in our place (Hebrews 2:14–17).

Second, His genuine submission to the Father. Three times He prays, and three times He yields: “not as I will, but as you will” (v. 39); “your will be done” (v. 42). This is real obedience, costly and complete. Philippians 2:8 says He “became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” His submission was not the surrender of a victim but the obedience of a Son who trusted

His Father even into the dark. Hebrews 5:8 says He “learned obedience through what he suffered.” The cup did not pass, and He drank it down for us.

Third, God’s sovereign purpose accomplished through the cross. At the arrest Jesus could call twelve legions of angels and refuses, “But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?” (v. 54). And as they bind Him He says it is all happening “that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled” (v. 56). The cross is not Plan B. It is the eternal plan of God, foretold by the prophets, accomplished through human evil yet entirely under the Father’s hand (Acts 2:23; Isaiah 53:10). Jesus is not overpowered; He is obedient, and the Father is not absent; He is sovereign.

Hold these three together for your class, because together they make the gospel. The true man feels the full weight; the obedient Son surrenders His will; the sovereign God works salvation through it all. This is why we can trust Him completely. The One who asks us to surrender our own cups has Himself drunk the worst cup ever poured, in genuine agony, in perfect obedience, according to the Father’s saving plan, and He did it for us.

Teach this with worship, not just precision. The goal is that your students would marvel that the eternal Son entered our anguish, bowed to the Father’s will, and refused to save Himself so that He could save them. When they grasp who knelt in that garden, their own hard obedience will look different, and their love for Him will deepen.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The full and true humanity of Christ, who genuinely suffered and dreaded the cup (Hebrews 2:14–17; 5:7)
- Christ’s genuine, costly submission to the Father’s will (Matthew 26:39, 42; Philippians 2:8)
- Jesus learning obedience through what He suffered (Hebrews 5:8)
- God’s sovereign purpose accomplished through the cross, foretold by the prophets (vv. 54, 56; Acts 2:23)
- The voluntary nature of the cross: angels uncalled so that we could be saved (v. 53)
- The union of true humanity, true obedience, and divine sovereignty as the ground of our salvation

Discussion Prompts

- Why does it matter for your salvation that Jesus truly suffered and truly submitted?
- How would you explain that Jesus was not a helpless victim but a willing, obedient Son?
- How does seeing God’s sovereign plan in the garden and the arrest deepen your trust in Him?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole scene, from the agony in the garden to the willing surrender at the arrest. Name one specific way the Jesus you have met here, who felt the full weight and still said yes to the Father, is shaping how you face your own hard obedience this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to gather the whole scene and press it into the week ahead. The class has knelt with Jesus in the garden, watched Him hold honest anguish and total surrender together, seen Him refuse the sword and choose the cup, and watched His friends scatter into the dark. The aim now is not more information but transformed obedience.

Invite students to be specific. A vague resolve to 'trust God more' fades quickly. A concrete answer might sound like: "I will bring this grief to God in honest prayer every morning instead of numbing it," or "I will set down the 'sword' I have been gripping in this conflict and trust Him with the outcome," or "I will pray 'your will be done' about the decision I have been dreading."

Draw out which part of the scene each student most needs. Some need permission to be honest with God in their pain. Some need to learn the surrender of 'not as I will, but as you will.' Some need to set down a sword. Some need to stop running in fear and stand with Christ. Let each name the one truth that has gripped them.

Close in worship, not merely resolve. The deepest response to Gethsemane is gratitude that Jesus drank the cup we could never drink, in genuine agony and perfect obedience, for us. Lead your class to marvel at such a Savior, and to leave the room ready to follow Him into their own hard obedience, trusting the Father as He did.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The integration of doctrine about Christ's humanity, obedience, and God's sovereignty with daily surrender
- Specific, concrete obedience as the fruit of meeting the Christ of Gethsemane
- Honest prayer and trusting surrender as the pattern for facing our own hardships
- Worship and gratitude as the proper motive for following Jesus into hard obedience

Discussion Prompts

- Which part of Gethsemane and the arrest do you most need to take to heart right now?
- What is one specific step of honest prayer or surrender you will take this week?
- How can this class pray for you as you face your own hard obedience?