

The Gospel of Matthew

Lesson 34: Gethsemane and the Arrest -- Matthew 26:36-56

There is a garden on the slope of the Mount of Olives, just across the Kidron valley from Jerusalem, and on this night it becomes the most honest place in the world. Jesus comes to a place called Gethsemane, which means oil press, and there, fittingly, He is pressed harder than any human being has ever been pressed. He takes Peter, James, and John a little farther in, and then Matthew lets us hear words we might never have expected from the Son of God: "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death" (v. 38). The strong Savior is shaking. The One who calmed the storm is now a storm inside.

Watch what He does with that anguish. He does not bury it, and He does not let it master Him. He falls on His face and prays. Three times He goes to His Father with the same cry: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (v. 39). There is the whole battle in a single sentence. He asks honestly for another way, and He surrenders completely to the Father's will. This is not the prayer of a man who feels nothing; it is the prayer of a man who feels everything and obeys anyway.

Meanwhile, a few steps away, His closest friends are asleep. Three times He comes back to find them unable to keep watch even one hour. "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation," He tells them. "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (v. 41). The contrast is unbearable and tender at once: the Lord wrestling in prayer, the disciples drifting in sleep, the very men who swore they would die with Him unable to stay awake beside Him in His grief.

Then the torches appear through the olive trees. Judas comes with a crowd and a kiss, and the swords come out. Peter cuts off a man's ear, and Jesus stops him cold: "Put your sword back into its place." Then He says something that changes everything: "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). He could call down armies of heaven. He calls down none. He lets them bind Him and lead Him away, and the disciples scatter into the dark. Tonight we will sit in this garden and learn what it means that our Savior chose the cup.

Group Discussion: In Gethsemane we see Jesus more openly distressed than anywhere else in the Gospels, and yet completely submitted to His Father. Why do you think God let us see Jesus this vulnerable, and what does it tell us about Him that His agony and His obedience are held together in the same prayer?

Personal Reflection: Jesus prayed, "Not as I will, but as you will," while everything in Him recoiled from what lay ahead. Where in your own life is God asking you to surrender something you would give almost anything to avoid, and what would it look like to pray that same prayer and mean it?

Read Matthew 26:36–56

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?

7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Psalm 42:5–6, the soul cast down yet hoping in God; Isaiah 53:7–10, the suffering Servant who was crushed yet silent, and it was the Lord’s will; Hebrews 5:7–9, Jesus offering up prayers with loud cries and learning obedience through suffering; John 18:4–11, Jesus stepping forward to meet His arrest and commanding Peter to sheathe his sword; Philippians 2:5–8, Christ humbling Himself and becoming obedient to death on a cross.