

Real Prayer

Matthew 26:36-46

Central Idea: Jesus taught us how to pray genuinely before God with openness.

Introduction

Stories have a way of keeping our attention in such a way that we learn more from them than any other medium. Sure, facts are helpful, but the statistics and the truth points and theorems don't help everyone learn. Stories have a way of grabbing our attention and of involving our imagination, our senses, our emotions, and our minds.

This historical account in Matthew of Jesus praying in Gethsemane addresses so many of our problems in prayer. It covers the issue of being weary in our praying or even lazy. It addresses persistent prayer, and it addresses God's will and our will. So let's take a look as we start our Easter season at how Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane in the final moments before His trial and death.

Text – Matthew 26:36-46

³⁶ Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." ³⁷ And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸ Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." ³⁹ And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." ⁴⁰ And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? ⁴¹ Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." ⁴² Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." ⁴³ And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴ So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. ⁴⁵ Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."

- I. Be honest about your feelings and situation in prayer.
 - A. Don't be afraid to express how you feel.
 - i. We are nearing the end of Jesus' ministry, and life. He has just shared His final meal with His disciples and now they have come to the garden to pray.

- ii. Gethsemane was found just outside of Jerusalem and it was about 2 miles walk many scholars believe that there were several gardens in the area and that Jesus would have had a regular place to pray in this garden.
 - iii. That's why Judas knew where to find Jesus when he betrayed him for 30 pieces of silver in a couple of the Gospel accounts.
 - iv. Jesus separates himself from the 12 taking the three of his inner circle with him, Peter, James and John. But even then, he asks his inner circle to pray for him, to pray with him, but he goes to his own place and begins to pray to the Lord.
 - v. In the tradition of some of David's most excellent psalms, called the imprecatory psalms, Jesus begins to cry out to God about what is happening and what is about to happen in his life.
 - vi. The thing that amazes me about David, and Jesus here in the garden, is their openness with God, their authenticity, their genuine approach. They don't hide their feelings and just tell God how it is when the rubber meets the road.
 - vii. The Bible specifically tells us that Jesus began to feel sorrowful in trouble in his spirit. He even tells the disciples, "My soul is very sorrowful even to death." It was clear that Jesus needed comfort in this time.
 - viii. **Illustration:** I've had times in my prayer life when I felt a little bit like what Jesus felt here not to the same depths of his feeling, but certainly the same kinds of sorrow and same kinds of trouble in my spirit. As a leader in the church there are times when I don't know how to pray. I don't know what to say. Maybe there are no words in certain cases and I don't know what to do. Even in crying out to God, I'm not sure what I'm even asking him to do. It's not because I'm double minded or not pure of heart or anything like that. I might be too close to the situation and we all have that in our prayer lives but it's hard to pray because of our state of mind, because of our emotions, because of our thoughts, and I believe that Jesus felt this as he prayed to the father before his ordeal truly began.
 - ix. **Application:** It's okay to not know how to pray or to have days of sorrow. There are groups of believers who don't think you should admit your feelings or your problems to God, that speaking them would be speaking a curse over yourself. But God's power is greater than that, and we need to present the truth of how we feel before God. He already knows you we feel as we come to Him in prayer.
- B. Don't be afraid to ask God questions.
- i. In his wearied state, many might ask the question, "Why was Jesus' soul sorrowful?" (Psalm 42:11) What made Jesus so sad that he was ready to die? A number of suggestions might begin to color the picture for us.

- ii. First, Jesus had just been in a Passover meal with his disciples, and Judas had left beforehand. Jesus knew what he was about to do, and told him that Satan had entered him, and then allowed him to go.
- iii. So Jesus knew of the betrayal of a close friend. The last verse of our text affirms that in the middle of the night when it is darkest, He knows that Judas, His betrayer, is coming (v. 46).
- iv. Along with this idea, we must not forget the extreme aloneness that Jesus must feel in the Garden. His trusted disciples are sleeping instead of holding Him up in prayer. Instead of being there for him in his darkest night of the soul, they were too weak to hold vigil with Him.
- v. Being betrayed and alone is enough to make anyone's soul weary. We were designed to have community, and when that is taken from us, we don't react very well. Jesus is alone, and part of his suffering starts here in the Garden as he faces the fullness of the cross He will bear alone with no support.
- vi. Beyond relational reasons for Jesus' anguish of soul, scholars have suggested other reasons for Jesus' sorrow based on the prayer that He continues to pray.
- vii. They usually go one of a couple ways with their understanding. Most see corollaries and parallels to Jesus' words on the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?"
- viii. The first way they approach this is with the most common theology and understanding, that Jesus bore the weight of all of humanity's sinfulness, that it began to be a burden to him here in the garden, or that this is where He began to fully realize the burden He was about to bear.
- ix. This interpretation has the weight of Scripture behind it, for Paul clearly says that Jesus became sin for us, taking our place (2 Cor 5:21). In Leviticus, we see the Scapegoat, a live goat that would be released into the wilderness bearing Israel's national sins every year (Lev 16:20-22).
- x. At the moment of darkness on the cross, this camp would point to passages such as Habakkuk 1:13 that says God cannot look upon sin. They would remind us that Galatians 3:13 talks about Jesus as becoming a curse for us. Here, the idea that Jesus substituted Himself in our place is alive and well.
- xi. The second way is to reject that Jesus bore the weight of sin, because God cannot interact with sin. They would read into this that Jesus simply did not want to face such a gruesome death. Then, Jesus is simply quoting Psalm 22 in his hour of discomfort.
- xii. They would see that it is illogical to suggest that Jesus, who is fully God and fully human, could be separated from the Father, who is also God. It

doesn't make sense to them, and they cannot see how God would forsake Jesus in His moment of need. They'd use passages like Hebrews 13:5 that talk about God never forsaking us.

- xiii. **Application:** I don't believe that Jesus would wimp out when it came to death on the cross, that His agony was simply from the act of death alone. I believe that Jesus bore the weight of sin, that it covered Him like a heavy garment, and that the weight of that burden was too much for one human to bear, and so it is good that He is also fully God! Jesus took my place, took my sin, took my shame, took my death, and went through the most agonizing day of death anyone has ever experienced. He did that for me. His agony was to take on sin as a sinless being, and to die though He was innocent. He did that for me, and He did that for you. He is our Scapegoat!

II. Be diligent and disciplined in your prayer.

A. Don't be absent in prayer while God shows up.

- i. Another facet of this account today is the disciples who try so hard to stay awake and alert, to be there emotionally and spiritually for Jesus in one of His most trying hours, and yet fail.
- ii. Jesus only asked the disciples to watch and pray with Him. The idea of watching is the idea of expecting and waiting. They could have assisted Jesus best simply by praying for Him in intercession.
- iii. But as with many of us, the disciples have had a long day, a busy day, with many activities and expectations. Preparing for Passover was one of the biggest deals all year long. Playing their parts in the meal and its ceremony would have been draining.
- iv. The disciples have been physically worn down, and Jesus Himself acknowledges that they are tired. He says that the flesh is weak. The idea is that while we want to do something, sometimes even our deepest desire cannot outweigh the pure physical ability to accomplish it.
- v. In those times of fatigue, we must find ways to be present when we are with God in prayer. It would be a terrible thing for God to be ready and waiting to answer us, but we are not wholly present because of our busy lives.
- vi. If we are too busy to pray and wait on God, then we have a deeper problem than just being tired. We are setting our schedules against that time that is supposed to bring us peace, and strength and rejuvenate us.
- vii. We are taking the cure for our weakness and tiredness away from ourselves by not seeing prayer as worthy of the time to gain that peace and strength.
- viii. **Application:** Prayer must not just become a priority to us, but it must also become our heartbeat, our DNA. We must believe in the power of prayer

so much that we would rather do it than those other important things that crowd prayer out of our schedules. As much as we hate to say it, our schedule is a very good objective indicator of how much we value prayer in our lives.

B. Don't allow your fatigue to win.

- i. Jesus is in such agony in the garden that Luke tells us that He sweat, and the sweat became like droplets of blood falling to the ground (Luke 22:44). Scholars have a number of interpretations for this.
- ii. The first theory is that this is a rhetorical expression that is more an idiom or an image of His agony. This undermines what the text actually says, and it is unusual in the text already. Some of these words appear only here in the New Testament.
- iii. The second is that the stress of Luke is on the falling of the sweat, thick like blood falling to the ground. This would show His hard work, His emotional and physical states, being affected by His spiritual burden.
- iv. A third is that the sweat was the color of blood. While this has support in ancient documents literarily, it is not really applicable to Luke's writing or purpose here.
- v. There is a fifth that only a few scholars have actually examined and given thought to, and that is that what the text says is what happened, that Jesus actually sweat drops of blood. There is medical evidence for this condition of stress that causes blood drops to come from the skin, called hemadrosis, a rare phenomenon, but recorded.
- vi. No matter how you think of this account or settle upon in your mind, please know two very important factors that stick out to us no matter what you think the text says:
- vii. First, it is clear that Jesus' agony is spiritual, mental, emotional and physical. He is about to undergo the largest and greatest task ever known, and He must be strengthened and ready for the task. Whether He sweat actual blood or not, He was certainly in a high state of distress.
- viii. Second, the phenomenal or extraordinary parts of this verse allow our minds to gloss over one of the most important small words in the verse, the word, "like." Luke is making a simile, here, not an equal statement. He says the sweat was LIKE blood falling to the ground, not that it WAS blood falling to the ground.
- ix. While the disciples lay on the ground, exhausted, willing to pray for Him, but not following through, Jesus does not quit. He waits on God into the night, not leaving until He has His answers.

- x. He doesn't allow the stress and fatigue to cause Him to sleep. While many are sleeping throughout Israel this night, the Redeemer's darkest day is just beginning.
- xi. **Application:** We need to learn to be like Jesus in our prayers, faithful and waiting, expecting answers and obeying those answers. We need that time in prayer to meet with God, to gain strength from Him and wisdom. Don't give up in your prayers right before God is finished with you. You might miss out on the answer, the gifts God gives, and the power that He wants you to have to see victory!

III. Be humble about God's response and direction.

A. Don't be arrogant or rude before the Lord.

- i. We cannot imagine what it must have been like for a sinless person to take on sin and its result, death. Jesus is clear about His agony in His soul. He is clear that this moment was a great burden to Him.
- ii. When Jesus approached the Father in prayer, He could have demanded that another way be made possible. He could have called on angels to deliver Him from the cross. But He did not. Even in His darkest hour, Jesus was humble before the Lord.
- iii. He approaches God with a question, not with a demand. He approaches with humility and meekness, asking if it is possible to be released from the weight of His burden. It's one thing to plan to die for the sins of the world. It's another to be there in that moment and feel the weight of sin beginning to crush you, to push in on a perfect and sinless being.
- iv. The pain of sins, the brokenness and impurity, Jesus took all that on, having never felt these things before, or the separation from God and others that sin causes.
- v. This was all new to Him. We have grown up used to it, but Jesus has not. It is almost as if in this Garden, the Garden of Eden is being replayed, but reversed, as Adam and Eve became aware of their sin and its shame for the first time, so Jesus might have had that same realization.
- vi. **Illustration:** And yet, He approaches with humility and subordination to the Father. I'm always impressed by the humility of the great prayer warriors in the Bible. Abraham ventures to ask God question after question as he intercedes for the possible righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah. David speaks his mind in the Psalms, but is always brought around to submitting his own thoughts and desires to the Lord.
- vii. Jesus, too, submits himself to the Lord's will (Heb 5:7). The first time He prays, He asks if it is possible to go a different route for redemption. The second time He prays, He accepts the Father's answer and resigns Himself to drink the dregs of the cup of judgment for the sins of the world.

- viii. In fact, Jesus was not shrinking from death alone, but from the weight of sin. In John 12:27, Jesus affirms that His very purpose in coming into this world was this hour of suffering, the time of His death for the sins of the world.
 - ix. When Jesus speaks in the second and third prayers, He affirms that the cup of the Lord is not going to pass from Him. This cup has the tradition of the Old Testament as a cup of judgment and wrath for wickedness. You can see from Psalm 11:6, Isa 51:17, 22 and Ezek 23:33 that the cup usually refers to God's wrath.
 - x. This cup is a cup of judgment for sin. But Jesus is sinless. So He bears the weight of the sins of the world, past, present and future, for all humanity. That's quite a load to bear!
 - xi. Indeed Isaiah 53:10 talks of the Lord's will to crush Him, the suffering servant Jesus. And the Garden is named Gethsemane, which means "oil press."
 - xii. Jesus, like the grapes, would be pressed and crushed, His blood would flow for the nations, and He would be like the slain Passover Lamb that saves believers from the final consequences of death!
 - xiii. **Application:** We should not come into God's presence demanding things from Him. We must have the fear of the Lord, a respect of God and reverent awe of Him and His power. We are His children. Why would He withhold answers from us? We need not treat God as a resisting suspect in our prayers, but as a generous Father! Let us submit ourselves to His will, even when that is suffering for now, for it will not always be so!
- B. Don't ignore His leading and answers.
- i. Some people do not think that God answers prayer. Maybe they have prayed and God has not done as they asked. Then they like to bring up passages like the one that says, "Ask anything in My name, and it shall be given to you."
 - ii. This is prayer from a lack of faith in God, and such prayers often are not in Jesus' name at all. Sometimes God's answer is not what we want or expect, and so we might not realize that the prayer is answered.
 - iii. Here, we can see that Jesus' original desire to have the cup pass from Him is answered with a "No." I'm sure that's not what Jesus wanted to hear as the reality of sin's pain and separation began to weigh heavily on Him.
 - iv. Nevertheless, Jesus in His next prayer session affirms that the cup will not pass from Him. He accepts God's "No" even though it was not what He wanted to hear.

- v. Then Jesus moves on to a different type of request, that God's will be done. The understanding of the phrase is that God's cup of judgment will not pass.
- vi. The way that Jesus asks, the cup could be passed, but God does not let it pass. So Jesus accepts the cup and will drink it. He will continue as planned with the redemption of the world.
- vii. But notice that Jesus is not alone in the weight He must bear. As we read from Luke's Gospel, we are told that though the suffering was so great that Jesus even sweat drops of blood, the angel of the Lord came and attended Him (Luke 22:43). God did not leave Him alone even though His disciples were sleeping.
- viii. **Application:** God does not leave us alone in our suffering. If we must bear the weight of our afflictions, and it is indeed part of His will, He is always with us through these ordeals. God always provides help and fulfills our needs exactly as they are needed. Though we suffer, we are not destroyed! The weight of your suffering may seem like it is too much, and it may test your limits, but know that beyond your limits is the strength and power of God to be successful against your burdens!

Conclusion

Action Points

- God is not surprised when we come to Him with emotional upheaval and struggles, and we are real about those things that cause us anxiety and distress. To fake a calmness in the midst of a storm is lying to God! Don't be afraid to tell Him how you really feel and understand the situation. He already knows it!
- Do you get tired when you pray? All of us do. For this reason or that, we have all been in the disciples' shoes. But is your fatigue one event or a lifestyle? Our schedules show how much we value prayer. When we make time for prayer, we can be renewed to face the many challenges of our days.
- We must approach God with reverent awe rather than demands and rights. While God has promised many things, we see Jesus and others in Scripture teaching us to be genuine with God without overstepping our place.