

Not My Will, But Yours

The Most Agonizing, but Victorious Prayer of Jesus

Scripture: Matthew 26:36-46

Sermon Series: *Matthew*

Topic: Jesus, Prayer, Temptation

Introduction

It's late Thursday evening and possibly around midnight. Jesus and his disciples have been walking from Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives. They have now arrived on the mount and have made their way to the Garden of Gethsemane. Here Jesus will pray, the disciples will sleep, Satan will attack, and heaven will assist.

On this night, the Savior of the world will fall on his face before his Father and pray the most agonizing, but victorious prayer that has ever been prayed, "*Not my will, but yours.*"

Father, come, lead us into this garden with Jesus. Open our eyes to see his glory. Holy Spirit, help us understand all that happened on this night. Keep us from the evil one. Teach us how to watch and pray, Lord Jesus. Amen.



Agonizing Prayer in Garden (vs.36-44)

Matthew now takes us into the garden of Gethsemane and into the intimate place of Christ's communion with his Father. Here Jesus prays one of the most amazing prayers in all of recorded Scripture. As we consider this prayer, we'll see the place of this prayer, the pain of this prayer, the posture of this prayer, and finally the progress of this prayer.

1) The Place of this Prayer (v.36)

Matthew begins by being specific about *the place of this prayer*. In the previous scene (vs.30-35), which we considered last week, Matthew told us that Jesus and his disciples were going "*out to the Mount of Olives.*" Now he takes us to the exact place to which Jesus went on that mount.

Matthew 26:36 (ESV) 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.”

A placed called Gethsemane. The name Gethsemane (Γεθσημανί) is “the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew גֶּתְשֶׁמָנִי, *gaṭ šēmāne* which means ‘oil press.’”¹ Since this place is located on the Mount of Olives, this is located within an olive tree orchard.

John referred to it as a “garden” and noted that Jesus liked this place very much, for he often met with his disciples here.² It appears that this was a place to which Jesus would withdrew from the crowds to be with his disciples in quiet seclusion.



Garden of Gethsemane, Mount Olivet, Israel

Luke also tells us that Jesus and his disciples occasionally spent the night here (Lk 21:37). This location is still known to this day and at this place there remains an olive orchard.

I go over there and pray. The purpose of going to this Gethsemane garden was to pray. Jesus liked to pray in this garden orchard and now was a time that he was most in need of prayer. Jesus entered the Garden of Gethsemane for the purpose of prayer. Thus, we see *the place of this prayer*.

The Pain of this Prayer (vs.37-38)

Next Matthew reveals the pain of Jesus in this prayer.

Matthew 26:37-38 (ESV) 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.”

Jesus is walking in sorrow and is seeking solace. He leaves eight disciples at one point and then takes his closest three with him deeper into the garden. The three are “**Peter and the two sons of Zebedee**,” which are James and John.

He began to be sorrowful and troubled (v.37). First, note that he “**began to be sorrowful**.” This walk into this garden signaled the **beginning** of sorrow. This hints that his sorrow intensified as the evening went on. Matthew uses two words to describe Jesus’ state of soul.

¹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, vol. 33B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1995), 782.

² Luke 22:39; John 18:1-2.

The word "**sorrowful**" (*lypeisthai*) is a word that means "anguish; deep grief."³ The word translated "**troubled**" (*adēmoneō*) is a unique word that appears in the NT only here and in the parallel account of this night by Mark (14:33). It means "to be distressed; be in anxiety. To be or become subject to extreme mental or spiritual anguish... sometimes to the point of losing one's composure."⁴

My soul is very sorrowful, even to death (v.38). Jesus confesses to his three closest friends the degree of internal struggle that he was enduring. He says that his deep sorrow and anguish goes to his very **soul**. In other words, this crushing grief is spiritual and goes to the very core of his being. Jesus' language here is "almost a quotation"⁵ of the very familiar repeated refrain of Psalms 41-42, where we read, "*Why are you sorrowful, O my soul?*"⁶ Jesus explains that his soul is "**sorrowful even to death.**" This does not mean that he wishes he could die, but rather that his inner agony is so acute that he felt as if it would kill him. He is essentially saying that this emotional pain is so intense that, "It feels as if I'm dying."⁷ Thus, in his "emotional turmoil"⁸ he asks his friends for support.

Watch with me (v.38). Jesus needs and requests the emotional support of his friends. He does not want to face this darkness alone. He needs their company, so he asks them to "**watch with me.**" This word "**watch**" literally means "to stay awake,"⁹ but certainly he is asking for more than that. Remember that this is the night of Passover. The word 'watch' is connected with the observance of Passover.

Exodus 12:42 (ESV) It was a night of watching by the LORD, to bring them out of the land of Egypt; so this same night is a night of watching kept to the LORD by all the people of Israel throughout their generations.

On that night the LORD watched over his people as he delivered them from slavery in Egypt. So, in keeping with that watchfulness of that first Passover night, the people were to watch that night and remember that by "**the strong hand of the LORD**" (Ex 13:3) he led them out of slavery and bondage. They were to watch that night and prayerfully consider the awesome power of God and all the plagues of judgment that God brought upon Egypt to condemn their

³ D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 543.

⁴ Rick Brannan, ed., *Lexham Research Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Lexham Research Lexicons (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

⁵ D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 543.

⁶ Psalm 42:5, 11; 43:5.

⁷ Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, vol. 1, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 979.

⁸ R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 377.

⁹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 259.

idolatry. They were to watch and see again—in the eyes of their imagination—the parting of the Red Sea and the great salvation that God worked as Israel walked through the sea on dry land with walls of water on either side of them. And they were to watch and see again those same walls of water collapsing upon and destroying the great army of Egypt.

Jesus wanted his disciples to “*watch with me*.” He was not merely asking his disciples to keep their physical eyes open, but rather he was asking them to watch *with him* in spiritual partnership. In his humanity he needed his brothers *with him*.

So here we see *the pain of this prayer*. Matthew gives us a hint of the internal agony that Jesus was experiencing. We have a sense of this soul-wrenching sorrow that he was feeling. His emotional distress and spiritual anxiety was so heavy that he felt as if he was about to die. The stress was unbearable and he was about to break. In that moment, he sought comfort and support from his closest companions.

The Posture of this prayer (v.39)

Matthew now points out *the posture of this prayer*.

Matthew 26:39 (ESV) And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My father...”

And going a little further. Jesus separates himself from them a little. Luke tells us that he went “*about a stone’s throw*” (Lk 22:41) away from them. That may be about 20 or 30 yards away. Jesus sought to be close with God, his Father. He says, “*My Father*.” This prayer is very personal. Mark tells us that he prayed, “*Abba, Father*” (Mk 14:36). Jesus desired the companionship of his friends, but his greatest desire was communion with his Father.

He fell on his face and prayed. Luke tells us that Jesus “*knelt down and prayed*” (Lk 22:41). If we put that together with what Matthew reveals here, then we see that Jesus first knelt down in prayer, but then as he continued to pray, he eventually “*fell on his face*” in prayer. Jesus is completely prostrate in prayer. He is in a position of abject humility before his Father. How many times had people come to Jesus in their hour of need and fallen face down in front of him? Now, we see Jesus in a great hour of need and he is face down before his Father. “This is the only time Jesus is said to have prostrated himself.”¹⁰ This reveals the great respect he has for his Father, the place of great need he was in, and the intensity of the emotion he was experiencing.

When have you last found yourself face down before God in prayer? Consider the distress of soul that drives us face down before God. What was the emotional condition of your soul at that moment? Were there not tears and groans also? Were you not in spiritual agony? Were you not nearing a breaking point? And were you not yearning to

¹⁰ R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 378.

fall into the arms of your Father? Can you see him stretched out, alone in the dark, before his Father?

Here we see *the posture of this prayer*.

The Progress of this Prayer (vs.39-44)

Now Matthew reveals that there was a certain progression of this prayer. First, there was intense prayer alone with the Father and then there was his return to his disciples. Then prayer again and again return. There are three cycles of this back and forth. In each cycle, Jesus prays alone for a time, returns to the disciples and finds them sleeping, and he then wakes them up and gives them instruction.

First cycle (vs.39-41)

First, Matthew points us to Jesus' prayer.

Matthew 26:39-41 (ESV) ³⁹ ...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."

Jesus' First Prayer

If it be possible, let this cup pass from me (v.39). "*This cup*" certainly refers to his suffering and death, but the idea is rooted in the OT. In the OT speaking of "*this cup*" was a reference to the wrath of God.¹¹

Jeremiah 25:15 (ESV) Thus the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: "Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it."

The innocent blood of the Passover lamb was shed to cause the just judgment of God to pass over those who were covered by that blood. The lamb suffered the consequences of judgment so that those under the blood would not have to. Since Jesus is the Passover lamb for those who trust in him, he is contemplating suffering the force of God's just judgment so that those for whom he would die, could be spared that just wrath. He would take upon himself wrath that he did not deserve. He would suffer the penalty, on behalf of those for whom he died, of their sins, not his own. Sin always separates from God and thus, Jesus knew the kind of separation he was about to endure. It is understandable that, in his humanity, he would want to avoid this, "*if possible*."

¹¹ Psalm 11:6 ["lot," NIV]; 75:7-8; Isaiah 51:19, 22; Jeremiah 25:15-16, 27-29; 49:12; 51:57; Lamentations 4:21; Ezekiel 23:31-34; Habakkuk 2:16; Zechariah 12:2; (cf. Job 21:20; Psalm 60:3; Isaiah 63:6; Obadiah 16).

Here we see the full humanity of Jesus. He goes to the Father in his pain, inner turmoil, and suffering of soul. He knows the plan of God and indeed he has multiple times predicted his own death. Yet death is something the living always seek to turn avoid and so the man Jesus prays to the Father that if there is any possible way for his will to be accomplished that does not require him to “drink this cup.” Jesus is not afraid to offer to God the content of his own desire. He speaks his request to God. However, he acknowledges that this request may not be answered in the way that he wants. Furthermore, Jesus confesses that there is something he desires even more deeply than his own desire to pass this cup.

Not as I will, but as you will (v.39). Jesus surrenders his will to the will of the Father. This is greatest battle. This is the **greatest** war. This is mankind’s great challenge. **Will we prefer the will of God or will we prefer our own will?** This was the first sin. In the first garden a man said to God, “Not your will, but mine be done.” And now, here in another garden, another man—a very different man—is saying to God, “Not my will, but yours be done.” This is the root of every sin. Whose will will win? Ours or His?

This is heart of prayer. Prayer is not a means by which we convince God to do our will, but rather a means whereby we become convinced that we should do his. *Jesus chooses to prefer God’s will over his own. This is the greatest victory!* Jesus controls and submits his own will to the greater will of God. And as proverbs says, the man who conquers his own will (i.e. “spirit”), is mightier than the man who conquers a city (Prov 16:32).

Apparently Jesus needed a break from the intensity of this prayer. Perhaps he sought to see if his friends were with him in this spiritual fight. So he rose from lying face down and got up and went to his disciples.

Disciples Found Sleeping

And he come to the disciples and found them sleeping (v.40). They were not “with him.” They were not keeping watch with him. They were not praying with him. They were not even awake. They were asleep. How disappointing this would have been. How disheartening and discouraging this would have been. Imagine being in the middle of the most intense night of struggle in your life and having asked your closest friends to pray with you, only to come to them and find them **snoring!**

Could you not watch with me one hour? (v.40). Apparently Jesus had been praying to the Father for about an hour. Matthew reports only a couple of sentences, however Jesus agonized in prayer to the Father for about an hour.

How’d they know his prayer if they were sleeping?

Some have stumbled at this point. Some skeptics ask, How could the disciples have known what Jesus was praying if they were sleeping? How could any of them

report what Jesus prayed to God if it was about “a stone’s throw away” from them? Well, the answer must be that Jesus later told them what he prayed. After all, he was with them for forty days after his resurrection (Acts 1:3). Certainly it is conceivable that he told them many things that they did not previously know or understand.

Jesus’ Instruction

Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation (v.41). Jesus tells them to stay alert and remain in prayerful communion with the Father in order to avoid falling into temptation. Thus, there are at least two parts to fighting temptation. First, being awake and alert enough to understand that you are in danger. Watching means being on guard, not being spiritually lazy. If you’re looking for the enemy to arrive, then you will not be surprised when you see him. Second, being wise enough to go to God the Father in prayer. Avoiding sin requires requesting help from God the Father!

The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak (v.41). The spirit of the disciples was willing to stand with Jesus, but the weaknesses of their humanity were greater. Recall their words earlier that night. Peter and all the disciples said, “*Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you*” (Mt 26:35). They all intended to remain faithful to him. But they all failed. Good intentions are not enough to help you faithfully endure the temptation to sin. Good intentions will not supply sufficient spiritual strength to righteously endure seasons of struggle against sin. Spiritual strength comes from the Spirit of Jesus, not from human self-determination.

Second cycle (vs.42-43)

Now begins the second cycle.

Matthew 26:42-43 (ESV) 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.

Jesus’ Second Prayer

If this cannot pass unless I drink it (v.42). Jesus continues praying to his Father. The wording reveals a subtle, but significant difference and progression. Jesus is now convinced that his drinking the cup of God’s wrath “*cannot pass*.” Jesus is convinced that this is the only way to accomplish the will of the Father.

Your will be done (v.42) Again, Jesus prays for the will of the Father to be done. He confesses his deepest preference is for the will of the Father to have priority over his own will. Jesus is here practicing what he preached. For when he taught the disciples how to pray, he instructed them to pray to God saying, “*Your will be done on earth as it is in*

heaven.”¹² Just as before, we are likely told only a short summary of all that he actually prayed at this point. This struggle is intense and therefore, he chose to take a break.

Disciples Found Sleeping

For a second time Jesus came to the disciples. Again, they were found sleeping. You would think that Jesus prior warning to them during the supper that, “*You will all fall away*” (Mt 26:31) would have been sufficiently shocking warning to keep them awake and engaged in earnest prayer, but it wasn’t. You’d think that Jesus asking them to “*Watch and pray*” with him would have kept them awake and engaged, but it didn’t. Now for the second time, they fail.

Jesus’ Instruction

Matthew does not tell us what Jesus said on the second occasion. It must have been something similar, because Mark tells us, “*they did not know what to answer him*” (Mk 14:40).

Third cycle (v.44-45)

Now have the third and final cycle.

Matthew 26:44-45 (ESV) 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.”

Jesus’ Third Prayer

He went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again (v.44). One wonders since Jesus “*prayed the same words again,*” does this mean that he prayed for about another hour? Is this the third hour of this agonizing prayer? Consider the depth of the sorrow in his soul and the crushing grief of his praying up to this point. If this is now the third hour of this sorrowful prayer, then we ought not to be surprised that Luke reports that, “being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Lk 22:44).

When you consider the intensity of the internal striving to surrender his will to the will of God, and the soul-crushing grief that he was enduring, it is no wonder that he broke a sweat and burst blood vessels in his head under the weight of his burden. Could such a prayer as this have failed to include “*loud cries and tears,*”¹³ as is noted by the author of Hebrews?

¹² Matthew 6:10.

¹³ Hebrews 5:7.

A month or so ago my daughter was sick and threw up several times. Afterwards, she had what looked like a rash on her cheeks from the burst blood vessels in her face. If thrusting out the contents of your stomach can cause blood vessels to burst in the cheeks, then how much more would contemplation of being thrust out of communion with the Father cause the blood vessels to burst in the head of Jesus?

His soul was tearing, his blood vessels were bursting, his heart was breaking, and disciples were failing him. Since there was no support from his earthly friends, there was sent to him support from a heavenly friend. An angel was sent to support him. *And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him* (Luke 22:43). After being supernaturally strengthened, Jesus again returns to his friends.

Disciples found Sleeping

Now for a third time Jesus came to the disciples and for a third time he found them sleeping. They are incapable of staying awake. They are unable to be with in prayer. They are simply too weak.

Jesus' Instruction

Jesus tells them that there'll be time to sleep later on, but now the hour is at hand and it is time for the Son of Man to be traitorously handed over into the wicked hands of sinners, who are now coming to him being led by Judas. Jesus instructs his disciples to get up and face what was coming towards them—the betrayer and the troop attending him. After praying for a few hours and surrendering his will to the will of God, Jesus stands and walks toward this cup and it's suffering and wrath.

Thus, we see *the progress of prayer*. Jesus began with questioning prayer, then he progressed to convinced prayer, and then finally to a confirmed prayer.

Application

Let's consider three points of application.

1) Have Faith in Victorious, Sinless Jesus (worship)

Our faith must be in him, for our flesh will never help us win. We cannot have faith in our own righteousness, because we have none (sufficient to the requirement of God's holiness). Good intentions will get no one into heaven. Jesus alone has earned the right to open the gates of heaven. He alone is completely righteous. He never failed. Even in the face of spiritual attack and physical exhaustion, he succeeded in completely obeying the Father's will and keeping all his word. We have all sinned, but Jesus has never sinned. Therefore, we must have faith in his righteousness and not in any perceived righteousness of our own. We must have faith in Jesus as God's sinless Son and suffering Savior. We must worship him for who this passage reveals him to be.

2) It's not a sin to be depressed

Jesus never sinned, but from Matthew's description he sounds to me like he was what I'd call depressed. He was overwhelmed with sorrow and sadness. There was a darkness over his soul so heavy he felt as if it would crush him. He was so utterly, inwardly grieved that he felt like he would die. The soul-wrenching anxiety he was under burst blood vessels in his head. So deep was this sadness that he let it out with "loud cries and tears!" I suspect he may have awoken the disciples more than once but no was concerned enough to go check on him. Humanly speaking, he was utterly alone weeping in the dark! Yet he never sinned.

There are many Biblical characters and godly people who have struggled with depression. Consider Job, David ("I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with weeping"¹⁴), Elijah, Jonah, Jeremiah ("the weeping prophet"), and Charles Spurgeon, and Marty Lloyd-Jones, and on and on... If you struggle with depression, know that you are not alone.

3) How to Overcome Temptation (work)

The second point of application has to do with how to be victorious over temptation.

1. **Plan to fight.** Be ready for temptation. Expect a battle and you will not be surprised when temptation comes. Jesus said, "**Watch and pray.**" Watching out for temptation means planning for it in advance. When Jesus was 40 days being tempted in the wilderness, he had memorized Scripture and used God's word to resist every temptation. Memorizing Scripture is one way to plan to fight and overcome temptation. **Plan!**
2. **Plead for help.** Invite support from godly friends. Don't fight temptation alone. Jesus said to his disciples, "**Watch with me.**" He did not want to be alone in that fight. He sought out the support of trusted friends. Enlist two or three trusted friends who will be ready to help you when you are being tempted. Ask these people in advance to be ready to help in such moments. Created a group chat or agree together how you will respond if you call. **Plead!**
3. **Pray to the Father.** Jesus prayed as he fought temptation. Jesus prayed to, "**My Father, Abba.**" It is not a sin to be tempted. It is when you are being tempted that you likely feel unworthy to pray, but that is the moment you need most to pray to your Father. Jesus probably prayed a few hours this night. Prayer kept him in communion with the Father, which in turn helped him overcome temptation and avoid sin. **Pray!**
4. **Prefer the will of God.** Jesus told God what he preferred in his situation and then he confessed that what he most deeply preferred was that God's will be done. Fight to convince your heart that God's will is better than your own will. Do not believe the lie that

¹⁴ Psalms 6:6.

your will is better than God's. Pray according to your new nature in Christ, not the old nature of sin. **Prefer** God's will!

5. **Persevere in faith.** Notice that Jesus did not merely pray once. He prayed multiple times. He prayed and then took break in three cycles. He prayed alone and then he sought the prayer support of his friends, then prayed again and then did the same. The point is he kept praying and didn't give up the fight against sin. The answer may not come after only one prayer. Persevere in prayer with the Father. In other words, stay close to Him and you, like your Savior, will find victory over temptation and sin.

Conclusion

What Jesus was doing in this dark garden was undoing what Adam did in the first garden.

Long ago, in the first garden, Adam thumbed his nose at God and said, "Not your will, but mine be done," while here in this dark garden Jesus falls on his face before God saying, "Not my will, but yours be done."

In the first garden, Adam ran away from the presence of God in haughty rebellion, while here in this garden Jesus walked into the presence of God in humble submission.

In that first garden the sweet communion between God and man was ripped apart, while here in this dark garden the soul of Jesus was ripped apart in order to restore the sweet communion between man and his God.

In that first garden the blood of an animal was shed to cover Adam's sin, while here in this dark garden the blood of Jesus was being shed to atone for our sin.

In that first garden Adam alone brought down a curse on mankind, while here in this dark garden Jesus alone brings up a blessing to mankind.

In that first garden Adam was neither watching nor praying for God's help, here in this dark garden for hours Jesus pleads for God's help—and he received it!

In that first garden angels were sent to keep Adam out, while here in this garden an angel was sent to keep Jesus in!

And praise God, for where Adam fell, Jesus rose up!

Discussion Questions

1. What does Gethsemane mean? What and where was it? Why did Jesus often go there?
2. Why do think Jesus separated himself, Peter, James and Joh from the other eight disciples? Why did he take with him, deeper into the garden Peter, James, and John? Why did he go further even away from them to pray?
3. The words "sorrowful" and "troubled" were used to describe Jesus' state of soul. What do these words mean? What do they reveal about the condition of his inner self? How would you describe what was happening internally within Jesus?
4. What does the phrase "very sorrowful, even to death" mean?
5. What does the posture of "falling face down" before the Father reveal about the kind of prayer Jesus was praying? How would you describe Jesus' prayer that night in the garden?
6. What is "the cup" that Jesus must drink?
7. What do you think about the conduct of the disciples that night?
8. What about this passage is most meaningful to you?
9. What does this passage reveal to you about Jesus?
10. What does this passage reveal to you about yourself?