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Bridgeway Church
Gospel of John #37
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Sermon Summary #37

Jesus in Gethsemane: The Paradox of a Supplicating Savior John 18:1-11; Mark 14:32-50; Luke 22:43-44, 51

Before we dive into the deep end of our Lord's experience in the Garden of Gethsemane, you need to understand that he did it *for you*. You need to come to grips with the remarkable and mysterious truth that what motivated Jesus to persevere through the pain of Gethsemane was *his love for you*. Knowing what was in the heart of Jesus will make all the difference in the world when you turn to understand, make sense of, and appreciate what he did.

What strikes me most as we enter with our Lord into the Garden of Gethsemane is the shocking contrast it presents with what has preceded. The events of Passion Week, up to this point anyway, seemed to have the aura of divine control. Jesus has repeatedly displayed remarkable confidence and courage and determination that reassures and reaffirms our faith in him as sovereign Lord. In his handling of each situation and in the unfolding drama of Passover, the prelude to his death, he expressed a calm dignity, a quiet power that cannot help but evoke awe and amazement.

He predicted without the slightest hint of fear or hesitation his own arrest and death. In Matthew 26:2 Jesus said to his disciples: "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified." Without so much as flinching he declared that when Mary anointed him with expensive perfume it was in preparation for his burial (John 12:7; Mark 14:8). Jesus calmly prophesied that one of the twelve who sat at the table there in the Upper Room would betray him into the hands of his enemies! If that weren't enough, he then told them that the bread and wine they were to receive from him pointed to his impending sacrifice of himself for sinners that they might be forgiven!

But with Gethsemane, everything changes. Suddenly the sovereign Son of God is found pleading with his heavenly Father that, if possible, he be spared this horrid death. He who only moments earlier sat rejoicing with his friends in the fellowship of a common meal is now grieved and distressed, groveling in the dirt with loud cries and tears. Why?

John himself does not say that the "garden" was named *Gethsemane*, but Mark clearly identifies it as such (Mark 14:32). The word itself means "oil press," and was the name given to this particular enclosed garden in which gnarled olive trees were the most distinguishing characteristic. Here in John 18:1-2 we are told that Jesus used to go there often with his disciples to pray. I believe there is significance in the fact that Jesus retreated to a *garden*.

Just as in a garden, called Eden, Adam's sinful disobedience ruined us, so too in another garden the obedience of the second Adam, Jesus, restores us! As Charles Spurgeon put it, "Gethsemane supplies the medicine for the ills which followed upon the forbidden fruit of Eden" (104). I think D. A. Carson put it best when he said,

"In the first garden 'Not your will but mine' changed Paradise to [a] desert and brought man from Eden to Gethsemane. Now 'Not my will but yours' brings anguish to the man who prays it but transforms the desert into the kingdom and brings man from Gethsemane to the gates of glory" (545).

After exhorting his disciples to remain behind in prayer, he took Peter, James, and John with him. Eventually, however, he even left them behind and prayed alone.

The first thing that strikes us about Gethsemane is the portrayal of the almost indescribable mental, emotional, spiritual and physical anguish that Jesus experienced. The synoptic gospels together paint a graphic picture using five different words. One word alone, apparently, simply could not capture the depths of his torment:

In Matthew 26:37 we are told that he “grieved” (*lupeo*), a word that means to be sad or sorrowful. In that same verse Matthew says he was “distressed” (*ademoneo*), a word, says Lightfoot, that “describes the confused, restless, half-distracted state, which is produced by physical derangement, or by mental distress as grief, shame, disappointment” (123). He was also “deeply grieved” (*perilupos*; Matt. 26:38), an intensified form of the first word above; hence, grief added to grief, grief once felt and now multiplied; sorrow upon sorrow. Luke says that he was in “agony” (*agonia*; Luke 22:44). Finally, in Mark 14:33 we read that he was “very distressed” (*ekthambeo*), a word that describes someone who is in the grip of shuddering horror as he faces some dreadful future. It is a term that describes one’s reaction to the presence of a supernatural mystery that provokes absolute terror.

Jesus was gripped by unbounded horror and suffering, the force of which drives him first to his knees, then face down upon the ground. He prayed fervently with torment so utterly overwhelming that, according to Luke 22:43, his heavenly Father dispatched an angelic attendant to strengthen him. Again, it is Luke who tells us that “his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground” (Luke 22:44). Let’s briefly consider both of these statements.

First, his weakness was so severe that God the Father felt moved to send an attending angel. Does it strike you as it does me, that the Lord of heaven and earth, our Lord Jesus Christ, should be so weak and needy that he required the strength supplied by one of his own creatures?

Jesus is the Lord over the angels of heaven! They do his bidding. They obey his will. They exist by his power and authority. Yet here he is nourished and sustained by one of them. How does one explain this remarkable act of humility, that Jesus would stoop so low for sinners like us and suffer so intensely for sinners like us that he required the assistance of his own creation to persevere?

But how could/did the angel strengthen the Son of Man? What did he say? What did he do? What did he bring? What did he impart?

I suggest he actually infused new physical strength and energy into his weakened frame. Perhaps the mere presence of holy company was reassuring to him. His disciples, weak in flesh, could not stay up with him. The angel was there lest he struggle alone. Surely the angel must have communicated tender sympathy to him, perhaps reminding him that all of the angelic host felt the same as they watched him in agony. Perhaps the angel bolstered his sagging spirit by *worshipping* him! Perhaps he came to remind Jesus of his ultimate victory, to remind him of the fruit that would grow from his sufferings, to remind him that Satan who tormented him would soon endure everlasting defeat.

We’ll never know until we ask him directly, but I wonder if the angel might have whispered into his ear the promises given to him by his heavenly Father. Perhaps he somehow reminded him of the glory he had with the Father from eternity past or portrayed for him the glory that would again soon be his. Maybe he reassured him that no matter what he endured, he would rise again from the dead. Might the angel have described for him his second coming to earth in the company of myriads of other angels, in great power and majesty? Perhaps the angel spoke of Christ’s universal dominion when one day he would rule and reign from sea to sea. We don’t know what he said or did, but evidently it worked!

Second, the statement in Luke 22:44 (“his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground”) has been variously interpreted. (1) It may be a figurative expression like our “tears of blood.” (2) He may be saying that the sweat was the color of blood. (3) Others contend that he actually exuded blood through the pores of his skin. (4) Many have argued that he means his sweat was falling on the ground “like” drops of blood. In other words, he was sweating so profusely that it appeared like the shedding of blood.

The “Hour” and the “Cup”

Why would the Son of God display such anguish and distress in the face of a future that he himself prophesied? Several explanations for the horror of Gethsemane have been made.

Some have argued that the “cup” and the “hour” from which he prayed for deliverance was not death on Calvary but rather the intense suffering and agony of Gethsemane itself. Charles Spurgeon was an advocate of this view. He explains:

“This 'cup,' it appears to me, relates . . . not to the last conflict, but to the conflict in which he was then engaged. . . . [That is to say], in the garden he felt a sinking of soul, an awful despondency, and he began to be very heavy. The cup, then, which he desired pass from him was, I believe, that **cup of despondency**, and nothing more. I am the more disposed so to interpret it, because not a single word recorded by any of the four evangelists seems to exhibit the slightest wavering on the part of our Saviour as to offering himself up as an atoning sacrifice. . . . Thus it appears to me that what he feared was that dreadful depression of mind which had suddenly come upon him, so that his soul was very heavy” (81).

It was, then, says Spurgeon, that *depression, despair, and despondency* settling upon his soul as he reflected on his present condition and his future sufferings which constituted the “cup” from which he asked to be delivered. Spurgeon then points to “how tranquil and calm he is when he rises up from that scene of prostrate devotion” (85). His prayer was obviously answered and the cup of torment soon passed, enabling him to regain his composure and face his accusers with courage and strength.

Others suggest that Jesus was not seeking deliverance from death on the cross but from *a premature death in Gethsemane* at the hands of Satan. On this view, Jesus was praying for strength to reach the cross, not for mercy to escape it. But in the gospels “hour” and “cup” consistently refer to his death at Calvary (Matt. 20:22; John 2:4; 12:23,27; 13:1).

Yet another view is that Jesus was not requesting exemption from the cross but that his suffering on the cross not be prolonged for eternity. He was asking that once the agony of the hour had come that it might pass, that he might be delivered from it. He was concerned lest, when he drank the cup of divine wrath, it not be removed and he be eternally engulfed in it. *Thus this prayer is for deliverance out of death by means of the resurrection rather than for deliverance from the sufferings which death on a cross would bring.*

The most likely interpretation, in my opinion, is that Jesus was asking the Father to remove the cup from him, if that should be his will. But note that Jesus asked for removal of the cup on one condition: only if the Father should will it. If the Father willed it, so did Jesus.

But we are still left with the question, “Why did he seek deliverance from death on the cross and why did the prospect of that death evoke within him such incredible anguish?” Had he succumbed to the pressure of the physical and emotional distress? Was it the prospect of separation from family and friends that accounts for this posture? Was it the shame and reproach he knew his death would bring on them that caused him to hesitate? Or was it loneliness, the prospect of facing death in solitude? I don’t think so.

Let’s not forget that countless hundreds, perhaps thousands, of men in his own day had been nailed to a cross. Jesus had undoubtedly seen them each day alongside the public roadways as he made his way to the carpenter’s shop or out into the fields where he tended sheep. Many of these had faced such a death with courage and without the slightest tinge of fear. Are we to think that Jesus was the sort who cowered in the face of what others often welcomed? No.

There is only one explanation for the mystery of Gethsemane. The death our Lord envisioned, the sufferings he knew lay before him, was no mere physical death, no ordinary martyr's anguish. It was nothing short of the death and sufferings of one who offers himself as a penal, substitutionary sacrifice for sinners. It was the cup of divine and holy wrath he was to drink; it was his Father's cup he was to drink. It was judgment he faced, but not of a political or civil nature. It was divine and eternal judgment, and that for something he did not do! It was the prospect of enduring the righteous wrath of an infinitely holy God that alone can account for the agony of Jesus in Gethsemane.

Were that not enough, one can only imagine what hideous words Satan must have spoken in his ear.

“Jesus, Son of Man, Son of God, do you actually think that you are in any condition to bear the sins of men and women? Do you truly believe you are capable of bearing this eternal load of guilt and judgment? You’re so weak! Look at you! You’re a disgrace! Your sweat drops to the ground like blood. You’re wallowing in the dirt! Some kind of Savior you are! Ha! And what if somehow you manage to pull it off? What do you hope to gain by it all? Look at these followers of yours: weak, selfish, sinful, prideful, arrogant, stupid men and women. You say they are your best friends, but where are they now when you need them most? They’re asleep! They didn’t care enough to give you one hour of attention. And of them, Judas, is about to betray you. And when he does, all the others are going to turn tail and scamper off into the night. Give it up, Jesus. It’s not worth it!”

Perhaps Satan would have sought to undermine our Lord's confidence in his strength necessary to see it through:

“Jesus, just look at yourself! What makes you think you’ll be able to bear up under what is about to come? You’re already an emotional wreck as you think about what it will take to redeem these ungrateful jerks you call disciples. Do you actually think you can endure the kind of beating and scouring and public humiliation that is yet to come? And why should you, anyway? You haven’t committed any sins? Why shouldn’t these suffer for themselves? That only seems just. Are you sure you’re prepared to watch your family watch you? Are you prepared to watch your mother stand at the foot of your cross as everyone mocks and slanders your name? You don’t look to me like you’re in very good physical shape. What happens if you die before you get to the cross? It will all have been for nothing. Give it up. Give it up.”

That Jesus was alone must also have provided Satan with arrows to fling at our Lord.

“Look around, Jesus. Who’s here to help you? Those three men over there will soon bail on you. The others won’t last long either. Remember the shepherds and angels and kings who attended your birth? They’re all gone. Even your heavenly Father is going to forsake you. Give it up. Give it up.”

Amazingly, in the midst of his anguish and torment, it was the welfare of the disciples that was uppermost in his mind! No less than twice Jesus interrupted his prayer and went to see if they were holding up under the strain. Each time he returned to prayer, having found them weak and weary and unwilling to sustain him, Satan must have gloated:

“See, I told you so! They care so little about you that they are not even willing to stay awake for one hour to render aid in your time of need! And yet you intend to endure an eternity of wrath for them?” I can almost hear Jesus respond: “Yes, Satan, I *will* die for them. I *will* suffer an eternity of hell for them, though they fail to give an hour of help to me!”

Spurgeon sums up:

“How . . . filthy [I am], how loathsome in the sight of God, - I feel myself only fit to be cast into the lowest hell, and I wonder that God has not long ago cast me there; but I go into Gethsemane, and I peer under those gnarled olive trees, and I see my Saviour. Yes, I see him wallowing on the ground in anguish, and hear such groans come from him as never came from [the] human breast before. I look upon the earth and see it red with his blood, while his face is smeared with gory sweat, and I say to myself, 'My God, my Saviour, what aileth thee?' I hear him reply, 'I am suffering for thy sin,' and then I take comfort, for while I fain would have spared my Lord such an anguish, now that the anguish is over I can understand how God can spare me, because He smote His Son in my stead" (131).

The Kiss of Betrayal

Why the “kiss”? Aside from the fact that it was customary for a disciple to greet a Rabbi with a kiss, they probably agreed on this sign for three reasons: (1) it was dark; (2) most of these would probably not have known what Jesus looked like; (3) they feared losing him in the turmoil that might transpire.

The problem, however, is that everyone knows a kiss is an expression of affection and intimacy. Betrayal, on the other hand, is an act of treachery and deceit. A “kiss of betrayal”, therefore, is a contradiction in terms. It’s like saying that someone had a “smile of hatred” or they “laughed with sorrow.” To speak of a kiss of betrayal is to say that what ought to be a token of friendship has become an instrument of treason.

We should by now be comfortable with this sort of paradox during Passion Week. That Jesus predicted his own arrest and crucifixion is paradoxical. That Mary should have anointed him with expensive perfume in preparation for his burial also strikes us as odd. That Jesus, the Son of God, should be found in Gethsemane groveling on the ground in prayer is perhaps the greatest paradox of all. That his disciples are told that they will soon abandon him in his hour of need strikes us as bizarre. But now, yet again, we are confronted with something that is hard to swallow: Judas Iscariot, one of our Lord’s closest friends, betrays the priceless Son of God for 30 pieces of silver. The irony is overwhelming. Jesus, whose “weightiness” and “worth” are beyond calculation, is auctioned off for a mere pittance, the price typically asked in exchange for a common slave!

The payment (Matt. 26:15; Mark 14:10-11) was probably given to Judas for information as to where Jesus could be arrested in a quiet setting with little chance for crowd unrest. It is possible that he first led this military and religious detachment to the upper room itself, thinking that Jesus and the disciples would still be there. Upon discovering that they had departed, Judas escorted the crowd to Gethsemane.

Note that Judas is described as “*one of the twelve*” (Matthew 26:14), no doubt to heighten the enormity of his crime. It was not that Judas was “one of the crowd,” or “one of the Pharisees,” or “one of the Jews” or “one of the arresting party.” No, he was *one of the twelve*, one of those with whom Jesus was most intimately associated and to whom he had wholly entrusted himself. John puts it yet another way: “Judas, who betrayed him, was standing *with them*” (John 18:5), that is, he was standing with the arresting party, not with the disciples.

We read that they came after Jesus “*with torches and weapons*” (John 18:3). This may be in anticipation of Peter’s taking up a sword and whacking off the ear of the high priest’s servant. In any case, it’s important for us to note that the purpose of God and the advance and expansion of his kingdom can neither be thwarted by physical violence and man-made weapons nor can it be aided and supported by such. Tragically, history is littered with stories of war and physical violence all of which were undertaken in the belief that either Christianity can be crushed and wiped from the face of the earth or, conversely, that it can be assisted and promoted by such. Both are wrong!

Did you notice how Jesus identifies himself in John 18:5, 6, 8 - “*I am He*” (*lit., “I am”*). Was Jesus simply saying, “I am Jesus the Nazarene whom you seek”? Surely there is more involved, for it is ludicrous to think that an entire Roman cohort (600 men), along with officers from the chief priests and Pharisees wielding clubs and swords, are going to keel over backwards like so many bowling pins at the sound of two words uttered by one unarmed Galilean carpenter!

This declaration may well be like that in John 8:58 (cf. Ex. 3:14). Thus Jesus is identifying himself as the self-existent, uncreated, eternal Yahweh of Israel now incarnate in human flesh (cf. Deut. 32:39; Isa. 41:4; 43:10-13). On the other hand, would the Roman soldiers have understood this declaration (the religious leaders would have)? It seems that more than the simple declaration “I am” is needed to account for their reaction.

Perhaps *something akin to the revelation of his glory on the Mt. of Transfiguration* occurred. The arresting party had come prepared for many possibilities (compromise, fear, resistance, evasion, lies, etc.), but what they heard and saw was altogether a shock. It was as if Jesus pulled back the curtain of his human nature and let the essential glory of God shine through. His overwhelming and breathtaking majesty gripped them and they fell flat like reeds in the wind. In a manner of speaking, his human flesh popped a leak! For only a short moment, the dam of his humanity was opened to let shine forth the floodwaters of his divine majesty. And they collapsed in his presence! It is almost as if Jesus is toying with them, in effect saying, the only reason you are about to lay hands on me and take me away is because I’m allowing you to do so.

In John 18:8 he asks that they “let these men go.” Again, Jesus’ immediate and ultimate concern in the midst of his affliction is the safety and security of his people! The amazing thing is that he knows their departure is the last he will see of them until after the resurrection. In other words, he knows that they will not simply leave: they will abandon him. Yet he cares for them and is concerned for their welfare and safety.

The fact that they “seized him” is striking when seen in the light of earlier pronouncements concerning their utter inability to lay hands on him (see Luke 4:16-30, esp. vv. 29-30; John 7:30; 10:39). The reason for this change is found in the statements of Jesus concerning his “hour” (see Matt. 26:45; John 2:4; 7:6,8,30; 8:20; and compare them with Matt. 26:45 and John 17:1). It wasn’t until the divinely appointed moment, in fulfillment of the purpose for his coming, that anyone was permitted to lay hands on him. There would be no premature death here!

Only in John’s gospel are we told that the disciple who picked up the sword was Peter. And only in John are we told that the poor fellow who lost his ear was named Malchus. And it is only in Luke’s gospel that we are told that Jesus healed him of the wound (Luke, being a doctor, understandably highlighted that point!). In all likelihood, Peter was aiming for his head and simply missed!

But why did Peter do this? Maybe he gained momentary courage after watching the soldiers collapse in fear when Jesus spoke. Maybe he was still determined to prove that he was sincere when he said “I will never fall away from you! I will die for you if necessary” (Matt. 26:33,35)! Maybe he was still convinced that the Messiah should never die (Matt. 16:22). Or perhaps he thought this was the moment that his loyalty was going to be put to the test; after all, Jesus had told him he would soon deny him three times. Whatever motivated him, we should remember that according to Luke 22:49 all of the disciples were asking Jesus if they should take up swords to defend him. Peter just happened to be quicker on the draw than the others!

We read in Matthew 26:52 that Jesus spoke to Peter and said: “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” Some have taken Jesus’ words as an endorsement of complete *pacifism*. Others point out that Jesus didn’t tell Peter to throw away his sword but to put it back in its place. And if wielding a sword was always and everywhere wrong, why did Jesus permit his disciples to carry one in the first place? The fact is, this has nothing to do with the issue of pacifism.

Our Lord’s point is simply that what Peter and the others were tempted to do by force is unnecessary. If Jesus needed protection, he had at his disposal “more than twelve legions of angels” (Matt. 26:53) to do the job. A legion = 6,000! Perhaps he mentioned “twelve” legions to indicate that there would be one for himself and one for each of his remaining eleven disciples.

But even more important, as Matthew 26:54 and 56 make clear, Peter’s action failed to realize that the arrest and eventual crucifixion of Jesus was absolutely necessary in order that Scripture might be fulfilled. Jesus had already submitted to the Father’s will. The struggle in Gethsemane is over. Jesus no longer prays that, if possible, he might be delivered from drinking the cup. He knows it is his Father’s will. He knows that the Scriptures have prophesied that it be so. Thus Peter was not only guilty of rash and immature behavior but also of biblical and theological ignorance!

Finally, Mark tells us in terse terms: “And they all left him and fled” (Mark 14:50). Why? I think their cowardice and panic can be attributed to at least two factors: first, their lack of preparation through prayer; and second, and even more decisive, their failure to reckon with the authority of God’s Word. Scripture had prophesied Messiah’s death. Scripture must be fulfilled. These men had allowed their emotions and fears to trump God’s Word. If they had only reckoned with the purpose of God as found in his Word, they would not have reacted with such fear and abandoned Jesus.

Before we too quickly criticize the disciples, perhaps we should recall the many occasions when we have run from any association with Jesus, filled with embarrassment, avoiding ridicule, fearful of what it will cost us financially, relationally, and socially.

Finally, and once again, do not conclude your meditation on this remarkable event without knowing why Jesus endured such agony in the Garden. It was for you. It was stirred and sustained in his heart because of the unfailing love he has for those for whom he would soon die. As the hymnwriter put it, “It was for me in the garden, he prayed ‘not my will but Thine.’ He had no tears for his own grief, but sweat drops of blood for mine. O, how marvelous, O how wonderful, and my song shall ever be. O, how marvelous, O how wonderful, is my Savior’s love for me!”