
The Weight Of the World's Guilt

"And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground" (Luke 22:44).

The words and descriptions used in Matthew, Mark, and Luke combine to say that the midnight hour of prayer in Gethsemane grew out of the greatest trial that Jesus had ever known during His earthly life.

His soul was "deeply grieved to the point of death" (Mark 14:34), and He was overwhelmingly "distressed and troubled" (Mark 14:33). In a heavily strained body, He prayed, "Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will" (Mark 14:36). As He began to pray, He knelt down and lifted up His voice to God. Then, as He proceeded in His praying—perhaps as a wave of sorrow and grief swept over Him—He fell on His face and lay prostrate before God. He was in great "agony," Luke said, using a word that appears only here in the New Testament and is colored with the idea of fear. It must have been "agonizing fear" or "fearful agony." Luke also said that Jesus prayed "fervently." This adverb that Luke employed carried the thought of "stretching out." It could be translated "extendedly" or "more persistently." So severely was Jesus taxed by this supreme ordeal that, after the first period of prayer, God sent an angel to strengthen Him (Luke 22:43). It could well be that if He had not been strengthened by the angel, His body would have given way under the awful burden that had been laid upon it.

With great reverence and with hearts of deep gratitude for what Jesus has done for us, let us ask, "Why was Gethsemane such a great struggle for Jesus?" Much of what happened

in that garden will continue to be a mystery to us because of our inability to grasp the fullness of it. Still, a careful study of the scene will bring to light some profound eternal truths regarding His sacrifice.

To be sure, His humanity was clearly visible. Jesus was the Son of Man as well as the Son of God. His incarnation meant that He had become one of us. He fully shared our physical characteristics and our limitations. He so completely identified with us that He was united in physical form with the weakest as well as with the strongest of the human race. In His early circumstances, He grew up with the common people, living daily in the poorest of conditions. As we see in these prayers, Jesus' human body was sensitive to both physical pain and mental anguish. He did not face this hour and the cross that would come with the dawning of the next day as an angel with a supernatural body that could not be pierced, punctured, or hurt. He entered into this time of suffering with a physical constitution that had all the characteristics of the human race.

The factor of time played some part in this struggle. Within a day, our Lord would bear the weight of the sin of the world in His body and spirit. He was so close to that event of actually offering Himself as the pure sacrifice for sin that He could feel the hot breath of sin blowing upon Him as never before. He had seen sin in the lives of the people around Him, but this was different from any experience that He had known! Furthermore, Jesus would not only be dying for our sin, but—in some way beyond

our ability to grasp—He would actually *become* sin for us. Paul said, “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21). In a few hours, then, Jesus would take on our sin and be separated from His Father. Even the preliminary stage of this eternal offering carried with it an unearthly challenge. Martin Luther encouraged an associate to pray, “Thou, Lord Jesus, art my righteousness, but I am thy sin.”¹ What it meant for Jesus to become sin for us cannot be fathomed by the human mind.

As the time for the crucifixion drew near, this struggle took on fearful, agonizing dimensions. During His earthly life, Jesus had continually seen the cross; but now He was entering into the vestibule of this terrible event. It is one thing to commit oneself to having an operation in three weeks, but it is quite another thing to enter the hospital and begin to undergo the preparations for it. This night was the beginning of Jesus’ sacrificing Himself for the atonement of our sins. It was the time when Jesus was finalizing His decision to carry in Himself the guilt of the world. He had already decided to do it. Indeed, He had made that decision before coming to the earth, but in this garden He was recommitting Himself to drink the bitter cup of death. With all the power he could muster, Satan was attacking Jesus’ mind and spirit. In his attempts to dissuade Jesus from going through with what He must do, he no doubt pointed to Jesus’ physical limitations, to the immensity of the task that was before Him, and to the horror of it all. Jesus handled these demonic attacks through agonizing, persevering prayer. He had basically overcome the devil in the wilderness by quoting Scriptures to him; but under these olive trees He used strong and tearful prayers, with which He re-committed Himself to His Father’s will.

The heaviest part of the trial may well have been the reality of the righteous, pure soul of Jesus confronting the dark powers of evil. He was approaching these forces as never before. He was moving toward them to take them on in cosmic combat. We have seen men such as Moses (Exodus 32:32)

¹Martin Luther, letter to George Spalatin, 8 April 1516, Wittenberg, Germany. Luther (1483–1546) was a German theologian and leader of the Protestant Reformation.

and Paul (Romans 9:3) grieve greatly for the sins of others; but in this garden the perfect Son of God was taking on the sorrow and pain that erupt from the impurities and the sin-wreckage of the world. Jesus—divine and pure in every respect, yet limited and restrained by a human body—was moving toward the enveloping powers of sin. His perfect righteousness was moving near to the mountain of evil, to the power of sin in its full and vicious form. As a person in perfect health might be shocked when he enters into a crowded room of the sick and dying, so Jesus in this garden confronted the torrents of sin that were flooding toward Him. His divine love was brought face to face with the ultimate of human debauchery and sin-cursed misery. He had already wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41), but He wept again in the garden as He saw the final result and fulfillment of rebellion against God.

The trial in the garden also was a struggle of unusual proportions because of the consequences that would flow from it. Should Jesus resolve to see this through to its painful end, the world would never be the same. The devil fought His decision with every ounce of his power.

Jesus’ prayers seem to indicate that He moved through them to a complete surrender to His Father’s will. He began, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me” (Matthew 26:39b). However, His second prayer appears more resigned (Matthew 26:42). He prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done.” He repeated the second request in His third and final period of prayer. Matthew says that He prayed “saying the same thing” (Matthew 26:44), while Mark and Luke contain nothing about the third period of prayer. One truth is certain by any account: Jesus emerged from the olive trees with His mind settled and committed to doing the will of His Father. His word to the three apostles who were waiting for Him is a brief command in Greek: “Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!” He had prevailed over all that the devil could do. By His faith in His Father and His resolve to be completely obedient to Him, He was now ready for the mob that would lead Him away to His trials and crucifixion.

One important lesson that we learn from

our Savior in this garden is the essentiality of persevering prayer. He had told His apostles, "Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation" (Matthew 26:41a), but they had slept while Jesus prayed. Consequently, in the next few hours, the apostles entered into temptation and failed, while Jesus entered into His trials and went on to victory.

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Why did Jesus feel so crushed by sorrow in the darkness of Gethsemane? Was it nothing more than the fear of pain and death? It was much more. It was the engulfing cloud of sin and iniquity that was moving toward Him, the bearing of all our sin in His spirit and body. It was the awful realization of being separated from His Father. It was His becoming—in the fullest sense—the Lamb of God, who was slain from the foundation of the world.

