

## Bethlehem Lenten Devotion

### **Text: Luke 22:39–46**

Jesus has just celebrated his last Passover with his disciples where he instituted the central meal of the church, the Lord's Supper. He now makes his way to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. In our reading Luke calls it the Mount of Olives. But it means the same thing because the Garden of Gethsemane sits at its base.

It is now only a few hours before Jesus will be arrested by the Jewish authorities. But he still goes to the garden to pray, as was his custom. But Jesus doesn't just pray because he is in trouble. He was constantly in prayer to his Father, but now more than ever he looks to him for help and strength to get him through the ordeal that lies ahead of him.

The disciples follow him to the garden, but Jesus leaves them to pray by themselves while he goes a stone's throw further to pray in solitude. We note in passing that while Christians pray together when they come together especially in worship or when they pray as a family, there is also a time and a place to pray in solitude like Jesus does here.

Before leaving them, he gives them an admonition—and he says these same words to us. Pray that you may not come into the time of trial. You may be more familiar with the words: Pray that you may not enter into temptation. Temptation here can be understood as the time of trial, the time of testing, when your faith is put to the test. As Christians we know that there will be times of trial ahead. We will be persecuted for our faith, and if not us then our Christian children, and increasingly so, as the world grows ever more hostile to Christ and his church.

Jesus leaves the disciples to pray and goes a little further where he kneels down and begins wrestling with God in prayer, wrestling especially with the Father's will that he goes the way of cross and suffering, that he literally walks

the Via Dolorosa, the way of suffering, that road in Jerusalem that still today leads to Calvary.

What a marvellous and yet mysterious picture this is: Jesus the Son of God wrestling with his Father in prayer—God struggling with God. It reminds us of that other strange and mysterious event of Good Friday when Jesus cries out to his Father: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me. Here in the garden at the Mount of Olives, he knows that Judas is about to betray him and that that will be the beginning of the end. He knows the agonising death that awaits him, so he cries out to God: ‘Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me’. Jesus didn’t want to face the agony of crucifixion any more than you or I would want to. As a human being—and remember Jesus is not only truly God but he is also truly human—Jesus also knows what it’s like to be afraid; to fear death; to suffer physical and mental pain. He knows what it’s like to face rejection and to be left all alone. And it’s just because Jesus is fully human, but at the same time fully divine, that he can help us, that he can give us grace to strengthen us in time of need, in the midst of our fears, and in the hour of death.

Jesus was no fatalist. He had no martyr-complex, nor was he looking for the kudos that comes from being a hero. ‘Father, take this cup from me’; ‘let me escape this suffering’. We would be missing the point if we thought that just because Jesus is God that he didn’t really fear death. The Book of Hebrews says plainly that during his earthly life Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death. Make no mistake, Jesus, as a human being, was afraid of what lay ahead: he did not want to drink from the cup of suffering and was afraid of death and dying. Jesus really struggled over the Father’s will; he sweated over it; Luke says great drops of blood fell to the ground. And so he can identify with us in our fears, especially in our fear of death and suffering.

But then with great courage and resolution, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we hear Jesus say something that clearly puts him beyond our human

experience. Something that marks him as more than a mere man, more than a human being. He says, 'Father, not my will but yours be done'.

We can only marvel at those words because they are words for us and spoken on our behalf. Christ agrees to accept the will of his Father unconditionally; he drinks the cup of suffering; he goes the way of the cross for us, so that we might no longer be prisoners of sin awaiting judgment, but people set free awaiting resurrection.

Father, not my will but yours be done. Jesus here is not only praying for himself, but also for us. We want to do God's will but often fail. Jesus takes up and includes in his prayer all our feeble struggles with God's will, all our half-hearted commitments, all our denials. Jesus intercedes for us with his Father, and he prays on our behalf: 'Not my will but your will be done'. God's will is fulfilled perfectly in Christ and therefore it's also fulfilled perfectly in us through faith. Therefore, we can have a good conscience before God because of Christ—because Christ intercedes for us when he prays with us and for us to the Father.

When Jesus finished praying, he came back to the disciples and found them sleeping. 'Get up and pray' he says, repeating his earlier admonition: Pray that you may not come into the time of trial, that you may not enter into temptation. The fact that the disciples were sleeping while Jesus was praying may seem puzzling to us. We might have thought that just at this critical time in Jesus' life, when he was facing imminent danger, that the disciples would have been there for him, that they would have been supporting him in prayer. We know from our own experience just how important that is, to know that your Christian friends are praying for you when you are dealing with a life crisis or facing an uncertain future.

And yet the fact that Jesus' disciples were sleeping while he was praying is profoundly comforting. For when it comes to our spiritual life and the great drama of salvation, we are passive, and Christ is active. He is the doer, and we are the receivers That does not mean that we should not watch and pray

and be as vigilant as we can against the temptations and attacks of the evil one. But it means that finally, everything does not depend on us and our faithfulness in prayer, but everything depends on Christ who prays with us and for us.

It is precisely for weak, faltering disciples like you and me that Christ struggled, prayed, died, and was raised again by the Father in the power of the Spirit, so that he might win the victory over sin, death, and Satan for us, so that these powers can no longer harm us. And remember Christ promised that the Spirit will help us in our weakness and in the hour of trial.

Christ himself continues to prayer with us and for us as he did in Gethsemane. He knows we are weak and so says to the Father on our behalf: 'Not my will, but your will be done'. And we say in faith: Let your will be done in us—and give us the strength to do it and forgive us when we fail. Praise be to Christ for his unspeakable mercy. Amen.

Pastor Jeff Silcock

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