

The Necessity of Gethsemane

Today's New Testament reading takes us to holy ground-- Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, a grove of olive trees on the East Side of Jerusalem, across the Brook Kidron. When Jesus and his disciples crossed the brook, it may have been red from the blood of the Passover sacrifices being made in the Temple

Now, just after midnight, Jesus, the Lamb of God, prepares his soul for the hour of his supreme sacrifice for us. The salvation of the world hung in the balance when Jesus agonized in this prayer in Gethsemane.

Follow as I read **Luke 22:39-46**.

³⁹ He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. ⁴⁰ When he reached the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial." ⁴¹ Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, ⁴² "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." ⁴³ Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. ⁴⁴ In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. ⁴⁵ When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial."

Old Testament prophecy anticipated that Messiah would enter the Holy City, Jerusalem, through the eastern gate, visible from Gethsemane (Ezekiel 43:1-4; Zechariah 14:4). Without this crucial prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus would not have been prepared to face the ensuing arrest, trial and crucifixion.

Jesus brought his disciples with him into the garden (39). The inner ring of Peter, James and John would be taught by word and example the necessity of watchfulness and prayer in preparing for life's greatest trials (Matthew 26:37; Mark 14:33). Jesus had just warned Simon Peter about his coming crisis of being "sifted" by Satan and of denying his Lord. He was now about to show Peter and the others from his own agonizing experience that prayerful watchfulness is the only way to prepare for life's crises (Luke 22:31-34).

Some of you perhaps have already endured your supreme crisis, and have experienced your "Gethsemane" of prayer. Most of us, however, may still face our greatest "evil day" (Ephesians 6:13). Sometime, sooner or later, you and I will stand facing a huge crisis, a major crossroads, a life-changing decision or a nearly overwhelming temptation. It may not appear much to the world on the outside of your experience, but it's your cosmic battle. The experience of Gethsemane is a necessary gateway through which we must pass to prepare for the critical experiences of our lives.

We can't exaggerate the agony of Jesus' experience in the garden. It was a confrontation of wills in a cosmic battle. After instructing the other disciples to remain behind, Jesus took Peter, James and John with him, "and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled" (NIV). "Horror and dismay came over him" (NEB). No one ever feared death as much as did Jesus this hour (Luther). He knew that the cross would bring more than physical torture and mortal death. Jesus knew that he would bear the punishment for the sins of the world, becoming sin for us, experiencing the hell deserved by all who would ever live (2 Corinthians 5:21). Sorrow was literally about to kill him. Luke, the physician evangelist, seems to imply that had not an angel ministered to him Jesus would in fact have died in the garden (43-44).

Life is a series of crises, and how we deal with them determines the direction and outcome of our lives. We can't avoid them. Decisions about our career, marriage, and children all are crises that shape our life. Negative crises cannot be avoided either, such as illness, joblessness, divorce, rebellious children, and the eventuality of death. And, there are crises endemic to the Christian as part of our pilgrimage of faith. We're susceptible to outrageous misfortune and our share of life's tragedies and heartbreak.

Crises are bound to come frequently in our lives, both good and bad ones, and times of testing, temptation, opportunity, but also rejection and disappointment. As children of God living in a fallen world, we're called to follow Jesus. That means we must share in the kinds of suffering which he endured, even taking up our cross of obedience and resisting the attacks of the Enemy and his dupes who seek to defeat us morally and spiritually.

James doesn't say, "If trials come," but rather "Whenever you face trials..." (1:2). Jesus warned Peter, James and John to watch and pray against temptation (or trials). For Jesus, the approaching crisis was the cross. For us, it may be a severe testing of faith through a personal tragedy, an impossible decision or a severe temptation to disobey God. You may be in the midst of a trial or crisis which may not be of your making. Or it may be a life-changing crisis, such as marriage or the birth of your first child. Maybe there's a great loss, like your health or that of aging parents, or the imminence of death. Your crisis may be the result of some poor choices you've made.

The confrontation of Jesus in the Garden was a crisis, but also it was for him a monumental conflict. Jesus fell to the ground and for hours poured out his soul in prayer to the Father. Jesus' agony was so great that *an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength.*⁴⁴ *In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground* (43-44). Jesus possibly suffered a stress-induced physiological condition, with sweat like drops of blood falling to the ground on a night when it was so cold his enemies built a fire to warm themselves.

Jesus dreaded the physical torment of the cross, a horrible form of execution. But if Jesus' dread was only of the physical torture, he was less courageous than say, the Maccabean martyrs, or Jesus' own disciples, some of whom were martyred, and even crucified upside down. Even unrepentant criminals are often stoical about facing a death sentence. But Jesus knew that on the cross he would be the sin-bearer, which would bring ineffable suffering. Jesus prayed if there was any other way the Father could rescue us, then let the cup of his suffering pass. But after his agonizing prayer, Jesus prayed in submission, "not my will but yours be done."

Your crisis may lead you into a conflict with the will of God, which may cost you dearly. Maybe that career decision being offered you is clearly outside of what you know to be the will of God, even though that job would mean so much to you! Maybe it's your desire to marry someone you love, but it's becoming clear isn't God's choice for you. Possibly your prayer for the miraculous healing of a spouse brings only God's answer, "My grace is enough for you!" You don't like what you're beginning to hear from God. It isn't what you'd planned or hoped. Think how Abraham must have felt when God told him to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19). Not only was it the supreme sacrifice for him, it didn't even make sense to him. And that's the way the will of God comes to us at times—something unwelcome and illogical.

But only after conflict with God's will can we come to a peace with God, a resolution that leads to conformity with his will. As a result of this great conflict of wills, Jesus was brought into perfect conformity with the will of the Father. This is what prayer's all about. Prayer is, as AW Tozer says, not an assault on the reluctance of God, or some attempt to find a formula to reverse the will of God. Prayer is the process, however long and painful, by which we adjust our desires to the will of God. It is really the activity of God to change us to be willing to do what God wills. This is the meaning of wrestling with God in prayer. We learn to conform our wills to his. Prayer is not about getting what we want, else Jesus failed in this prayer (FW Robertson). In the garden, Jesus died to what he as a human wanted in order to conform to what God the Father wanted.

How well I remember a season of praying to God to give me a certain ministry opportunity. I "claimed" the promise of Psalm 37:4, "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart." I set myself to delight in the Lord, and I just knew that he would call me to this particular place of ministry if I went after it hard enough. I prayed like never before. When things began to look unpromising, I prayed even harder, and I cried before the Lord, thinking surely I couldn't delight myself any more, and the answer seemed so right for me, the ministry so suited to me.

What I finally discovered was, only as I learned to delight in the Lord did I know what my heart's desires were! As a friend told me one day over breakfast, God "played a trick" on me. He changed my heart's desire, so that particular ministry

no longer was the desire of my heart. God became the desire of my heart. He won't deny us *that* desire.

Jesus' hours of agony in prayer resulted in a quiet resignation to the will of the Father for the cross. He could finally affirm, "Not my will, but yours be done" (22:42). In his mysterious self-emptying he came to a firm conclusion that his heavenly Father's will for the cross was that good and perfect will, pleasing to him (Romans 12:2; Isaiah 53:10). Notice, Jesus was at peace after Gethsemane as he went to the cross, his terrible suffering and horrendous death. Life's storms don't stop after our Gethsemane struggles. Our Gethsemanes simply prepare us for the storms to follow. We're now better prepared to take the way of our own cross. Jesus was at peace because he knew that the cross was God's good, perfect and pleasing will (Isaiah 53:10). And so we must trust that when our lives are surrendered to God in taking the way of the cross, even suffering is his will, and the Lord will be glorified thereby.

In his book, *Trusting God, Even when Life Hurts*, Jerry Bridges says we learn to trust God fully when we can affirm that he's perfect in his wisdom, love and power. The prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane was an affirmation that God is love. How crucial was this prayer of Jesus to prepare him for those hours of dereliction when he would suffer the wrath of God on the sins of the world! It was critically important for the Son to know the cross was because of the Father's love for the world and that he would be delivered by his resurrection (Hebrews 12:2). Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane also led him to a new affirmation that God is faithful (22:43-44). Even in the horrible agony of Gethsemane, God was faithful to minister to his Son through the angel in this time of intense loneliness and abandonment.

In my life, it's been during the times of greatest crises and trials that God's presence has become most real to me and his word has spoken most clearly and encouragingly to me (Romans 15:4); such as when I found myself unemployed at age 57 after a 19-year pastorate; when Nancy was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease; and we were faced with a return to the US to a city where we knew absolutely no one. In all of these, God's presence was especially real to me. When did God send his angel or his word of encouragement to you?

Jesus brought with him to Gethsemane Peter, James and John, and charged them to watch and to pray. Jesus had warned them "The spirit is willing, but the body is weak" (Matthew 26:41; Mark 14:38). Of ourselves we cannot be prepared to face life's crises. Peter was not prepared. He missed his opportunity to be strengthened in the face of his upcoming pressure to deny Jesus.

When Jerry Bridges was writing the last chapter of his book about trusting God, his wife was diagnosed with incurable cancer. He said then that theoretical, theological knowledge had to be translated into personal faith and practice in his

life. Like Bridges, we don't know what crisis looms before us. We don't yet know about the transfer notice, the pink slip from work, the diagnosis from the doctor. Gethsemane prepares us to face life trials.

In a previous pastorate, Nancy and I were privileged to be the guests in the home of our newest elder and his family. Their younger son had been diagnosed with cystic fibrosis, a normally fatal disease, and so the medical world prepared them the Lord in this matter, and the child's mother related to me how she agonized over her child; yet her agony seemed to make no difference in her son's prognosis. She agonized to the point of utter exhaustion until one day she simply let go, and turned her child over to the Lord. Basically, she said to the Lord, "Yet not what I will, but what you will." God healed her son to the amazement and utter unbelief of the medical community, which had tried in vain to aid the child.

Surrender doesn't always end this way. Some children remain ill, some marriages not healed, and prayers seem unanswered. But when we surrender our wills to the God of the cross, we're prepared to face our cross but also we're free to receive his generous, amazing gifts. God may have a hidden gift for you, such as the substitute ram he provided for Abraham after he surrendered Isaac (Genesis 22:13), the unique ministry he gave me in Belgium, and the wonderful life he's given me here in Madison, with this ministry close to my loving family and new friends.

Gethsemane was Jesus' gateway. It's our gateway to face whatever life has for us, and always a gateway to deep joy and peace.