

Soul in Anguish

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Scripture: Matthew 26:36-44

Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. Then He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me."

And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will." And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done." Again, He came and found them sleeping for their eyes were heavy. And He left them again, and went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more."

Lord Jesus, this is Your encounter with Your Father and Your disciples. We ask that You would, through Your Spirit, help us to understand this passage and even beyond that, to know what we can learn from it and apply it in our own lives. We ask this prayer in Your name. amen.

Reading through this passage always brings up disconcerting images for us because it pulls at our heartstrings; it lets us down a little bit as humanity, moves us to vicariously feel for Jesus in this particular instance of what He was going through and had to endure. It leaves us a little unsettled if we stay with this passage without looking at antecedents that are before, or something to come ahead of us. Yet, I was drawn to this passage to mine it for what it was worth, not looking at it from the context of Good Friday, but just as what happened in the garden of Gethsemane.

The word 'anguished' really comes to the fore. It's a word that is very descriptive. Even if we don't fully understand all that it entails – just the word itself evokes within us feelings of pain and hurt and other things associated with being let down and going through a very difficult place. It is derived from the Latin word which means extreme pain, distress or anxiety. It can be both physical and mental.

This is what Jesus was going through at this time. He had just come from the supper with His disciples, had to deal with Judas at that point, had to dismiss him to go and do what he needed to do. He had a little interaction with Peter and in the midst of this kind of loyalty that Peter brought with him, He had to point out that it wasn't going to stand this test – that before the cock crowed, he would deny Him three times.

All of that must have played on Him as He then walked towards Gethsemane just to spend time with His Father in prayer. And the disciples were with Him. But as we look at this passage, we see that, at one point, He stops His disciples, eight of them in fact, and leaves them there. He takes only three – Peter, James and John. Then He tells them how grieved His is, how distressed He is. *"I am grieved to the point of death."* Then, He asks them to watch with Him. He goes a little further and He begins to pray for the first time: *"If it is possible let this cup pass from Me."*

Just think about Jesus asking God, His Father: "Please, if I don't need to drink of this cup, will you let it go?" Then He ends, "However, not My will, but Yours. This is what I want – that this cup will pass, but ultimately it is Your will that I want to follow." And when He comes back to the disciples, they are all fast asleep. He tells Peter, "You could not watch with Me for one hour? One hour! You couldn't do that?" Then He said, "Watch out that you don't fall into temptation; the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak."

He goes back and He prays again. And this time He says, "If this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done." He finishes that and He goes back; and the disciples are sleeping again. As I was reading that I wondered what went through His mind in this hour that was so difficult – for Him to find that His closest disciples had gone to sleep. They couldn't stay and watch with Him as He had asked. The Bible says that their eyes were heavy.

The third time He addresses His Father, He says the same thing. And then He comes back to His disciples who are still sleeping and He says, "Are you still sleeping and resting? It's time! The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up and let us be going."

Sometimes it is difficult, especially with passages that have to do with the narratives of the Passion, to disconnect from it and say: What does that mean to me? We end up feeling sorry for Jesus, don't we? That's always the fear on a Good Friday service – that we leave here having pity for Jesus for what He had to endure.

Yet, I ask the question: Given what has just transpired, that He was in such anguish, going through such a terrible time – it is not a realistic expectation for us to ask the question, 'If I am going through an anguished period in my life, if it's difficult, if there's such pain and hurt in my life, is it reasonable for me to look at Jesus in a similar situation and see what I can glean from this passage of Scripture which I can use to help me get through the situation?' As I looked at that from a different light, it occurred to me that there's a theme that is emerging, and the theme was this: What did Jesus do when confronted by a grave adverse decision?

He did two things:

1. Jesus requests His disciples to support Him, whether it was prayer or to watch with him. He needed support at that time. So, He reached out to His disciples.
2. He reached out to His Father in heaven.

If that is an indication of what Jesus did, then we too, in a similar situation, must do the same. If you and I are facing a difficult situation today where we are anguished as well, where we don't have the answers, where God is calling us to do or be or say something that we don't want to do and yet, we know very clearly this is His will. Lord, this is going to be a painful experience. I can't do it. This is going to lead me into all kinds of pain. I can't embrace this. Yet you and I know that, as disciples of Jesus, there can be no joy in our lives when we knowingly say 'No' to His will. There can be no joy in following our own flesh in any situation knowing that God wants it to go a different way.

I believe that many of you in this congregation today are in this place, because He placed this scripture on my heart for us this morning. So, if that's where you are, then there are two things that you need to do.

1. Reach out to people around you – close friends. If you notice, Jesus didn't take the eleven disciples with Him; He left eight behind and took only three. These were the three with whom He was vulnerable. With them, He shared exactly what was going on in His heart. This is one of the few times when Jesus bares His feelings, what He is going through, with His

disciples. Hitherto He had only talked about events that would happen, not the emotions that would be connected with those events. Now Jesus is saying, "I'm anguished and pained to the point of death." So, if we are going to navigate in the way that Jesus did, then we need to be able to have around us, two or three people who we can bare our hearts and our souls to in times of difficulty. We've got to have that – ones to whom we can say, "This is what's going on in my life."

The question that begs to be asked is: What are those difficult times that go on in my life when these things apply. For example, maybe God is asking you to forgive someone who has done you wrong. Maybe God is saying, "I want you to rebuild that relationship. I want you to let go of any anger, resentment, bitterness that you have." Maybe God has been speaking to you for a long time, and you've said, "No, Lord! I cannot do that."

I read on the internet, and I think it's doing the rounds on Facebook as well, of a courtroom judgment that came out of a county court in Texas, where a police officer was sentenced to ten years in prison because she walked into a home thinking it was her home (and it wasn't) and she shot the occupant thinking that he was a threat. She shot him through the heart and he died on the spot. There was such a big furor over this about a year back. The jurors gave her ten years and she was to walk out of court, straight to prison.

The brother of the boy who was killed, asked to take the stand and this is what he told her. He said, "I love you like anyone else. I'm doing this because this is what my brother Bothem would have wanted me to do. I forgive you." And then he says, "I know if you go to God and ask Him, He will forgive you. I don't really want you to go to jail, but that's the law. I can't help that. But I have nothing against you. I just want you to know Christ." He then asked if he could give her a jug, and the judge gave permission. They hugged and she was just sobbing and sobbing and wouldn't let him go.

As I read that, I thought to myself – what a difficult thing to do! none of us can ever get closer than he was to that situation. We can't. and so, our minds immediately go to how he could have done that? Or maybe he could have. But it was his brother, and he was able to say, "I hold nothing against you," because he was a disciple of Jesus and presumably that's what he felt God wanted him to do. And he did it.

Forgiveness is not the easiest thing to do. We often carry our hurt or anger for a long time, hoping that one day we'll get even or something will happen. We don't let it go. I wonder whether some of you here have been carrying it for a long time and God has been inviting you to let go of it. I wonder whether the burden is extremely heavy today. Then I wonder whether this message is for you. Is God saying, "This is a difficult thing and I know it. But this is what I want you to do."

2. Cry out to the Lord.

I love the psalms because they are so guttural. They speak words that you and I would like to think in so many situations, and then we ride along with that. Most of the psalms are like that; they speak exactly what the psalmist was thinking. They are harsh, they are raw, they are real, and yet they are cries to the Lord. The Bible tells us in the gospel of Luke, that when Jesus was praying to His Father in the garden, He was praying with such intensity and fervor that His sweat was like blood drops on His brow.

When was the last time that you and I prayed with such intensity for something that is breaking your heart? When was the last time you prayed for a loved one who is sick or prayed for a friend who is having a broken relationship, prayed for somebody who is grieving and not able to get over it, or somebody who is going through financial trouble and can't get out of it? When was the last time you prayed for yourself and took your pain to the Lord and cried out with that intensity? The beauty of this passage in Luke is that Luke adds that when He was praying, God sent angels to encourage Him. I believe God would do the same today – that when we pray, when we take to Him our deepest concerns, He will manage to hold us and lead us. We may not see angels coming, but it could be in the form of anything that God chooses as a means to encourage.

3. Jesus was vulnerable and very often we are not. We very rarely tell people how we feel about something. We probably share a situation, but we rarely say what we are feeling in that situation. Especially men! It's not done to share what I am going through – that I'm feeling scared or fearful. But Jesus was vulnerable to the extent where He shared with these three – Peter, James and John exactly what He was feeling.

So, I lay that before you.