

Luke 22:39-46
A Prayer, and an Exhortation to Pray

For some Christians, prayer is natural. They are referred to as “prayer warriors” and are sought out frequently by those with spiritual and physical needs. Others, and I must confess myself to be among them, are not naturally inclined to pray. Our minds tend to wander, our thoughts are unfocused, we struggle with words. We cannot discover how to speak to God. We are at one point too formal, and at others too familiar.

But for any believer, nothing will drive them to prayer more quickly and with greater fervor than grief. When something terrible happens, when an event outside of our control (as if anything were in our control) threatens us, the believer turns immediately to God for help. When our lives are stable, solid, and secure prayer can be considered a luxury, but when disaster strikes, it becomes a necessity.

Jesus, Himself, was, as prophesied “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3). When the Pharisees confronted Him for healing a man on the Sabbath, “grieved at their hardness of heart” (Mark 3:5). At the grave of His good friend Lazarus, “Jesus wept” (John 11:35). And though He was making a triumphal entry, “when He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it” (Luke 19:41).

But when Jesus considered the death awaiting Him, and the enormity of the sin He would bear, the depth of His grief is impossible for us to understand. After all, He was perfect. He was pure. His experience was, therefore, unique and none of us can truly comprehend it. The author of Hebrews wrote that Jesus “offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him” (Hebrews 5:7). But who among us can appreciate that. We may have had such an experience of prayer, but as sinful people in a sinful world, we cannot claim innocence. We cannot claim that we are undeserving of God’s wrath and justice.

Thus the nature of the encounter in the garden is a mystery beyond our frail understanding. We know that Satan had tempted Jesus before. Luke wrote earlier in his narrative that Satan offered Jesus the meeting of His immediate needs of hunger, the greater rewards of rulership over the world, and finally the opportunity to test God and His sovereign plan. In each case, Jesus refused. Now, hours before His arrest, an arrest which Jesus knew would lead to His crucifixion, Satan again tempted Jesus. Though he is not mentioned in any of the three accounts by name (John glosses over the garden scene), clearly the struggles Jesus faced could have come neither from God, nor His own nature, which was without sin.

Scripture clearly that Jesus can be truly tempted. ¹⁷Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted” (Hebrews 2:17-18). But this particular temptation was unlike any we face. Our temptations are to hold onto our sin and refuse to embrace holiness and righteousness. Jesus, being perfectly holy and righteous, was being tempted to hold onto these and refuse to accept the weight of our sin. The sin we struggle to avoid, Jesus struggled to accept. Not that He did sin, but that He was made to appropriate our sin unto Himself.

Setting

Luke's narrative of this particular episode is disconcertingly brief. Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke omits any naming of the specific place, simply referring to the general destination as the Mount of Olives. He also omits any naming of the disciples, either as a group or those select three who accompanied Jesus into the garden. On the other hand, it is Luke alone who mentions the visit from the angel. And it is Luke alone who draws our attention to Jesus sweating. Luke alone captures that anguish.

So having finished the Passover meal, Jesus and His disciples headed out into the night. Jesus had said all He was going to say. He had prayed one last time with them. In simple words, Luke wrote that Jesus "came out and proceeded as was His custom to the Mount of Olives" (v. 39). He must have given no indication that anything unusual was going to happen. As He had done on many other evenings, Jesus simply went for a walk after supper and found a quiet place to pray.

Obediently, "the disciples also followed Him" (v. 39). In the early spring the night air would have been pleasant, and many people had camped around the Mount of Olives so they could be within the boundaries of Jerusalem and thus able to celebrate the Passover. The specific place to which Jesus headed was a garden called Gethsemane. The name means "olive press" and obviously referred to the use of the place. Likely also was the fact that it was a private garden, the owner of which was willing to allow Jesus to use it for His private devotions from time to time.

We can place this unnamed believer in the same category as the man who allowed Jesus to use the room in which He and the disciples had just eaten. Also, we can recall the man who provided the donkey for Jesus to use in His triumphal entry. It is a reminder that the kingdom of God will be filled with such nameless individuals who gave what they could to the kingdom of God.

It is interesting that Jesus did the usual thing. That is most unusual for a man who knows He is being hunted. Unless, of course, He meant to be found. Jesus often went to the garden of Gethsemane. Judas, no doubt, had often accompanied Him, along with the other disciples. It was Jesus' custom. It was His routine. It was His plan. Judas was not to be feared.

Instruction

Once again, we see that Jesus was focused on others. "When He arrived at the place, He said to them, 'pray that you may not enter into temptation'" (v. 40). Did Jesus have a particular temptation in mind, or was this a generic admonition? In light of the next few hours, I think it is safe to assume that Jesus specifically meant to pray that they would not disavow their Savior. Not that the disciples understood at that moment that that would be a temptation. Nevertheless, as believers we pray for strength to be strong in our faith during whatever trials God chooses to use to sanctify us.

There are several lessons to draw from this instruction. First, Jesus, Himself, was going to pray. If Jesus needed to pray when facing temptation, how much more so should we. He did not have a sin nature that corrupted Him from within. He had enjoyed the personal experience of heaven and the physical presence

of God the Father. We are fallen beings who can only imagine eternity. We have seen neither heaven nor God. Our faith must take place in the imagination only.

Therefore, it is amazing that we can be subject to spiritual pride. As frail as we are, we nevertheless can find ourselves in moments where we feel confident and satisfied in spiritual matters. This is a sure sign of impending disaster. Remember that just a few minutes before, while dining together, the disciples had been confronted by Jesus' words that one of them was unfaithful. And what was their response? "Peter kept saying insistently, 'even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!' And they all were saying the same thing also" (Mark 14:31). How much the disciples needed to pray not to fall away. How much their lack of prayer would be reflected in the coming hours when they fled. This is not to suggest that our salvation can be lost, but it does mean that our salvation is sustained through prayer.

Second, not only must we pray, but we must pray for ourselves. Jesus had just prayed for the disciples. In fact, He had just told them that He had prayed for them in this very specific way, "I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail" (Luke 22:32). Yet Jesus commanded His disciples to pray for themselves. Each of us has a responsibility to do what we can ourselves for our own spiritual growth. To be sure, it is a blessing from God to have others with whom to share our concerns and to call upon to cover us in prayer, but that does not mean we ought to neglect such prayer ourselves. Our sanctification is our own business first and foremost.

Finally, prayer is the remedy proposed throughout Scripture for what believers should do in times of great trial.

"Call upon Me in the day of trouble;
I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me" (Psalm 50:15).

"Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray" (James 5:13).

Before Jacob met Esau he prayed, "deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, that he will come and attack me and the mothers with the children" (Genesis 32:11).

When Hezekiah learned that the great Assyrian king Sennacherib was about to attack he ¹⁵prayed before the Lord and said, "O Lord, the God of Israel, who are enthroned above the cherubim, You are the God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. ¹⁶Incline Your ear, O Lord, and hear; open Your eyes, O Lord, and see" (2 Kings 19:15-16).

Let us turn to family, friends and the Church for support, but let us always first turn to God.

Example

After commanding His disciples to pray, "He withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and He knelt down and began to pray" (v. 41). The vagueness here is clarified a bit by the accounts of Matthew and Mark. As Mark wrote,

“³²They came to a place named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, ‘sit here until I have prayed.’ ³³And He took with Him Peter and James and John, and began to be very distressed and troubled. ³⁴And He said to them, ‘My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death; remain here and keep watch.’ ³⁵And He went a little beyond them, and fell to the ground and began to pray” (Mark 14:32-35). That is, it seems Jesus took His remaining eleven disciples to the garden, then entered the garden with Peter, James, and John, instructing the others to “sit here until I have prayed.” Then leaving those three, Jesus moved a bit further off and “fell to the ground and began to pray.” The distance to which Jesus removed Himself is not possible to determine with complete accuracy, after all, people can throw a stone any variety of distance and the expression is probably a colloquial one at that, but we can safely assume that the disciples must have been close enough to hear what Jesus prayed, and stayed awake long enough to see the angel.

Though standing was customary in prayer, Jesus did not remain standing. He knelt and eventually fell on His face according to Matthew. The intensity of the moment was too much for His frail, human body to absorb. He collapsed. As the writer of Hebrews wrote, Jesus prayed with “loud crying and tears” (Hebrews 5:7). The defection of Judas, the rejection by the religious leaders, the pain of the cross, the turning away of God the Father all weighed on Jesus with a weight that was, almost, unbearable. We cannot possibly imagine or appreciate the moment.

Luke records briefly the gist of the three prayers found in Matthew’s narrative. Luke wrote that Jesus prayed simply, “Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done” (v. 42). We cannot miss the submissiveness of the prayer. There was complete and absolute submission to the will of the Father. No conditions were laid down, no mitigating factors were requested. Jesus simply presented His request before God, and then resolved to do whatever God commands.

Jesus referred to a cup. A cup was frequent and well-known reference to judgment.

“Rouse yourself! Rouse yourself! Arise, O Jerusalem,
You who have drunk from the Lord’s hand the cup of His anger” (Isaiah 51:17).

“¹⁵For thus the Lord, the God of Israel, says to me, ‘take this cup of the wine of wrath from My hand and cause all the nations to whom I send you to drink it. ¹⁶They will drink and stagger and go mad because of the sword that I will send among them” (Jeremiah 25:15-16).

“You will be filled with disgrace rather than honor.
Now you yourself drink and expose your own nakedness.
The cup in the Lord’s right hand will come around to you,
And utter disgrace will come upon your glory” (Habakkuk 2:16).

This could not have been an easy prayer to pray. Jesus knew perfectly well the pains of crucifixion, and He understood clearly the implications of being forsaken by God the Father. He was neither ignorant nor naive about what the next twenty-four hours would bring. The prophecy had been spoken long ago about the death of the Messiah.

“¹²Many bulls have surrounded me;

Strong bulls of Bashan have encircled me.

¹³They open wide their mouth at me,
As a ravening and a roaring lion.

¹⁴I am poured out like water,
And all my bones are out of joint;
My heart is like wax;
It is melted within me.

¹⁵My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
And my tongue cleaves to my jaws;
And You lay me in the dust of death.

¹⁶For dogs have surrounded me;
A band of evildoers has encompassed me;
They pierced my hands and my feet.

¹⁷I can count all my bones.

They look, they stare at me;

¹⁸They divide my garments among them,
And for my clothing they cast lots” (Psalm 22:12-18).

There is no better example of prayer in Scripture. The goal of any prayer ought to be that God’s will be done. Doing God’s will ought to be the desire of any true believer.

“I delight to do Your will, O my God;
Your Law is within my heart” (Psalm 40:8).

It was the prayer Jesus had taught His disciples,

“Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

It is a prayer that comes with the certain promise that God will hear and answer.

“¹⁴This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. ¹⁵And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him” (1 John 5:14-15).

We can be sure that we can relate our desires to God, but ultimately we must be submissive.

Luke then records that “an angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him” (v. 43). Only twice in the life of Jesus is an angel recorded as ministering to His needs. The first instance is during His temptation in the wilderness, for after Jesus rebuffed Satan, “the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to Him” (Matthew 4:11). Now, in the garden, once again Satan tempted Jesus to vary His course from the path God had chosen, and once again, an angel is sent to sustain Him.

That the angel was needed is indicated by Luke, the doctor, who noted that there was a sign of hematomidrosis. Jesus, “being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground” (v. 44). This event occurs when the capillaries dilate to such an extent that they burst. Those near the sweat gland mix the blood with the perspiration and it appears as if the person is sweating blood. Clearly Luke was trying to demonstrate the anguish of Jesus. The very words are indicative of the emphasis Luke placed on the moment. The word he used for agony describes the most extreme mental and emotional suffering. The word he used for fervently, describes the act of stretching until reaching the breaking point. Luke was using all the intellectual resources he could command to try to describe the scene of Jesus withstanding the temptations of Satan to avoid the cross.

While we do not see angels physically present when we pray, we are informed by the writer of Hebrews that they do not neglect their role as helpers of those who pray. As that writer asks rhetorically, “are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?” (Hebrews 1:14).

Exhortation

Luke does not mention how long Jesus prayed. Matthew and Mark suggest it was about an hour. So, it was now perhaps midnight, maybe even later. “When He rose from prayer, He came to the disciples and found them sleeping from sorrow” (v. 45). Note that the disciples were not sleeping because it was late, though it certainly was that. Nor was it because they had eaten a big meal, endured a busy week, or taken the long walk to the garden. Luke specifically states that the disciples were sorrowful.

The disciples had been overwhelmed with the words of Jesus that night. They had heard Him say again that He would die. They had heard Him say one of them would betray Him. They had heard Him say they would fall away. Their world was shattered. They were overcome.

Jesus, however, realized this was not the time to rest. Returning from His time of prayer, He “said to them, “why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not enter into temptation” (v. 46). There was a sense of urgency in His voice. The sleepy disciples stirred and looked about them, wondering what was the need for such activity in the dead of night. And then they heard the sounds of voices and the rustling of footsteps in the garden. Others were there, and they were many. Judas had arrived.

Takeaways

Prayer is foundational to the sanctification of the believer. It is the element of our faith by which we communicate with God. Without it we are unequipped for battle against our flesh and the world. After exhorting the Ephesian church to put on the full armor of God, Paul concluded “with all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert “ (Ephesians 6:18). We would do well to heed this admonition.