

The Darkest Night
Luke 22:39-53
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When I was growing up in that little Baptist church in Prentice, WI, I didn't really start listening to Pastor's sermons until I was in the 9th grade. That is a story for another time. Up until that point, I spent some time on Sunday mornings counting ceiling tiles and even more time looking at a larger-than-life-size painting of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was the backdrop for the baptistry in our little church. Sometimes the picture was covered by a curtain, but often the curtains were open and I was intrigued by how life-like it seemed. Once I was old enough to understand what the painting was about, I sometimes tried to imagine what it would have been like to be with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane that night when he was arrested.

Friends, today our journey through Luke's Gospel brings us, again, to Chapter 22, where we will explore verses 39-53. If you have your bible you can turn there, otherwise, the verses will be on the screen. This is Luke's account of what happened in the garden that night. Jesus has just finished eating the Passover meal or "Lord's Supper" with his disciples in the upper room. Luke slows down his narrative and provides many details for us because, in his view, sundown on Thursday evening marks the beginning of the most important day, 24-hour period, in the history of the world. As we look at what occurred in the garden that night, let's pause and pray the Lord would both encourage and challenge us through his Word today.

Luke 22:39 – Jesus went out and made his way as usual to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him.

The Mount of Olives is located just on the east side of Jerusalem. The other gospels tell us Jesus specifically went to the Garden of Gethsemane, which was likely a walled olive garden or orchard on the west bank of the hill, facing the city and temple. It may have been a 2 or 3 mile walk from the upper room to the garden. Apparently, this is a place that Jesus had gone to pray on a number of occasions.

Luke 22:40 – When he reached the place, he told them, "Pray that you may not fall into

temptation." The temptation likely included falling asleep, which would mean they would not be much support for Jesus, as well the temptation to be cowardly and abandon Jesus when he is arrested.

Luke 22:41, 42 – The he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and began to pray, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me- nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done."

The cup is a symbol or metaphor for Jesus experiencing the wrath of God. He would experience that wrath as he died in place of sinners, bearing the punishment we deserve. It will be a horrible death, physically and spiritually, but it would accomplish the salvation of all who turn to him. Thus, Jesus is really praying, "Father, please, I don't want to do this, but if it is what you want, I am willing."

Luke 22:43 – Then an angel from heaven appeared to him (Jesus), strengthening him.

That is all Luke says about that, but the disciples have missed it because they were sleeping.

Luke 22:44 – Being in anguish, he prayed more fervently, and his sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground.

Despite the angel's help, Jesus is still in agony as he anticipates bearing our sin. Luke says Jesus' "sweat became like drops of blood." This may have been a metaphorical statement, but it certainly could have been a condition known as "Hematidrosis." This is where a person extreme anguish or physical strain causes blood vessels to dilate and burst, mixing sweat and blood. The point is, Jesus was experiencing great emotional and physical trauma.

Luke 22:45 – When he got up from prayer and came to the disciples, he found them sleeping, exhausted from their grief.

This is another example of what frail followers Jesus' disciples are, though they were likely tired from a very long Thursday.

Luke 22: 47, 48 – While he was still speaking, suddenly a mob came, and one of the Twelve named Judas was leading them. He came near Jesus to kiss him, but Jesus said to him, “Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?”

We focused on Judas and his betrayal a few weeks ago. Judas’ role in Jesus’ arrest is letting his enemies know where Jesus could be found away from the crowds and, since it was dark, identifying which one of the group was Jesus. The kiss is the signal saying, “Arrest the one I kiss.” The mob Judas leads consists of Jesus’ enemies. That includes, likely, some temple priests and Pharisees, numerous members of the temple guard, kind of a private police force, and maybe some of the Roman soldiers who were in the city to control the crowds during the Passover.

Luke 22:49 - When those around him (the Disciples) saw what was going to happen, the asked, “Lord, should we strike with the sword?”

There are apparently (verse 38) two swords among the 11 Disciples. They are clearly no match for the armed mob that has come to arrest Jesus. But as with many men, physical resistance is their first reaction.

Luke 22:50 – The one of them (John tells us it is Peter) struck the high priest’s servant (John says his name was “Malchus”) and cut off his right ear.

The short swords were for stabbing, not slicing, which means Peter likely intended to kill this man.

Luke 22:51 – But Jesus responded, “No more of this!” And touching his ear, he healed him.

Even as Jesus is about to be arrested and executed, his composure, compassion and power are evident.

Luke 22:52, 53 – Then Jesus said to the chief priests, temple police, and the elders who had come for him, “Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a criminal? Every day while I was with you in the temple, you never laid a hand on me. But this is your hour-and the dominion of darkness.”

If Jesus really was guilty of a crime, if he was trying to lead a political insurrection, they could have arrested him anytime. But they arrested Jesus at night because they fear the people in the city will not tolerate such obvious injustice, and because, well, it tends to be easier to do evil in the dark. “Men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil.”

Okay, that is Luke’s account of what happened in the garden that night. Now let’s focus on a couple of the things God is saying to us today through this portion of His word.

#1 We need to recognize the incredibly high price Jesus paid for our salvation.

I sometimes fear folks might get the wrong impression when we talk about our salvation being a free gift and proclaim we can experience free and full forgiveness by turning to Jesus. Yes, salvation is free for us, but not free for the Lord Jesus. It cost him more than we can possibly imagine. The sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf includes not only his death on the cross, but the suffering that leads up to that death. Being flogged by the Roman soldiers is part of it, and I think it also includes the intense emotional agony in the garden that involves sweating drops of blood. These, I think, are part of the price Jesus paid for my sin and your sin. The agony Jesus felt in the garden also points to how horrific Jesus’ death on the cross the next afternoon will be. Having read and heard the gospel accounts of Jesus’ death many times, I developed a familiarity which caused me to kind of miss the horror of what Jesus experienced. Then, in 2004, I saw Mel Gibson’s movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. Its very vivid and graphic portrayal of Jesus’ bloody beatings and death helped me realize how horrifically brutal it was. It now makes me uncomfortable to ever think about the physical pain Jesus endured that day.

But there is more to the cross than that. A few years ago Siri and I did a reading for our Good Friday service, entitled, “It is very powerful.” We have done it a couple of time since. Each time I read it, it impacts my soul more. The reading focuses not just on the physical suffering Jesus endured, but on the spiritual suffering he experienced in our place. When Jesus prays, **Luke 22:42 “Father, if you are willing, take this cup**

away from me,” he is referring to the cup of wrath the Old Testament says the wicked will be forced to drink. It is what Jesus, the perfect, pure and sinless son of God, drinks on behalf of sinners, on my behalf. On your behalf. As I said, it makes me uncomfortable to think about Jesus’s physical suffering, and when it comes to the spiritual suffering, it is hard to even imagine how terrible that was.

One verse that does give us a clue in **Matthew 27:46b** where, while on the cross, Jesus says, “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.**”

I believe that points to this reality: God the father and God the Son (Jesus) enjoyed a relationship of perfect love from before the beginning of time, in eternity past. Somehow, as Jesus was on the cross in our place, the relationship was severed as Jesus experienced God’s wrath for us, for our sin. How long did this take? I don’t know. I suspect it occurred outside of the realm of time. It was, however, an experience more horrific than we can ever imagine. That explains why Jesus is in such agony as he contemplates what will take place the following afternoon. If it was just the physical pain that Jesus was concerned about, His courage would be very impressive. Various Christian martyrs have sung hymns before they were burned at the stake. Their composer would seem superior to that of Jesus if he is just thinking about the crucifixion. Yet, because he is anticipating the spiritual separation from the Father, a hell a trillion times worse than anything we can imagine, his agony does not diminish his courage.

Perhaps most significantly, what happened in the garden demonstrates the necessity of Jesus’ death on the cross. It has become fashionable in so-called “progressive Christian” circles to suggest that Jesus dying on the cross for our sins should not be part of the Christian message. A few years ago, Delores Williams, a Presbyterian theology professor, said, “We don’t need Jesus hanging on the cross or other weird stuff like that.” In her book, *Another Gospel*, Alisa Childers quotes a friend who says, “I cannot believe in a God who would torture his own son to death as some kind of payment. I could never do that to my child, and I just cannot believe in a God who could.” Some churches seem intent on removing the cross as a central part of the gospel, of the Christian message. They claim Jesus’ crucifixion was an unfortunate event that illustrates how those in power oppress those who are challenging that

power. Now, as I like to say, this is America. A person is free to believe whatever he/she wants to believe. But no one should ever pretend this particular belief has anything to do with Christianity. The bible makes it very clear that it was God’s plan for Jesus to die on the cross. And as Tim Keller point out, this is apparently the only way that our salvation could be accomplished. In the garden, Jesus prays, **Matthew 26:39 If it is possible let this cup pass from me.** I think he means “If there is any other way to accomplish the salvation of humanity besides what will happen on the cross, let’s do that.” The fact God’s plan doesn’t change, that this is the path the Father has for the son, is an indication there is no other way for Jesus to bring salvation. He must go to the cross. Only then can God be, as Peter says in Romans 3:26 “The one who is just and the one who justifies.” Only Jesus’ substitutionary sacrifice allows for sin to be punished as it should be, while those who have committed those sins are forgiven. That is why it was not possible for the cup to pass from Jesus.

So, on a practical note, if you ever move from this area and are choosing a new church, if you are advising family members or friends who live in another community about choosing a church, make sure it is a congregation where the truth about the cross is proclaimed and taught. A key phrase is “substitutionary atonement” or even better, “penal substitutionary atonement.” I might help to remember “PSA,” but do not confuse it with “Public Service Announcement” or “Prostate Specific Antigen.” The phrase simply means Jesus experienced God’s wrath in your place to accomplish your salvation. Now many other churches that are not Baptist teach this important truth and, unfortunately, not all Baptist churches do. But, if I was on a search committee choosing a new pastor, this is the one question I would ask, at least today. Do you believe in Jesus’ penal substitutionary atonement? A pastor who is wrong about what Jesus did on the cross will almost certainly distort the gospel in significant ways.

#2 Lesson for us is We should seek to pray according to God’s will.

Now there is probably a lesson about staying awake when one should be praying. Once or twice I have been in a prayer meeting with our other pastors and have fallen asleep and kind of missed

my turn to pray. Even worse...this has not happened in many years... is falling asleep while one is praying out loud and not making sense. Anyway, if you are tired and falling asleep it's ok to pray then, but it is also good to have prayer times when you are alert.

In verse **Luke 22:42** Jesus prays **“Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me—nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.”** In the NLT it reads **22:42 “Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me.** Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.” In other words, Jesus is saying “Father, answer my prayer according to your will. I have told you what I want. But if what you want is different from that, I am content to go with your plan.” I think Jesus provides an important model for us to follow in our prayers. We are to pray according to God's will, with **John 5:14** in mind. **This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.**

Yet, I have encountered some Christians who resist the idea we should pray according to God's will. They claim that indicates a lack of faith when we add the phrase “if it be your will” to our prayers. They may quote **James 1:6a,7 – But let him ask in faith without doubting. That person (the doubter) should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.** These folks say, “when you pray for something, you have got to believe the Lord will give you what you asked for. If you do not believe, you won't get it.” But is that how it works? Jesus taught us, “If a child asks for bread to eat, a loving father does not give him a stone. We are also confident if the child asks for a stone to eat, the loving father will not grant that request. He will give bread instead.”

Folks, we sometimes ask God for stones, for things that are not good for us. Sometimes, for example, I ask God to make my path easier, when there are important lessons to learn on a more difficult path. I sometimes ask to have enough money to buy the things I want to buy, when my ultimate and eternal good may be better served by not having all that money and all those things. Remember what the Lord tells us in **James 1:2-4 Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let**

endurance have its full effect. So that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.

Friends, I don't think I have ever prayed for trials to come into my life. Maybe I should, but I don't. I usually ask God to keep my life free of trials. Yet, sometimes, the Lord, because he is wise, because he loves me, and because he is concerned about my ultimate and eternal good, will refuse my requests and give me those things I would never ask for. He does this because those are things I truly need, even though I don't see it that way right now. It is because I have faith in God's wisdom, not my own, that I pray like Jesus, “Father this is what I want, nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.”

A number of weeks ago I told you about my good friend, Pastor Mark Janke, who is dealing with pancreatic cancer. My prayer is that the Lord would heal him, according to his will. That means I would like the Lord to perform a miraculous healing and extend Mark's life for many years. However, I realize that may not be God's will. The Lord may choose instead to heal Mark in heaven and his time remaining on earth may be short. Mark is praying in the same way. “I want to be healed, now. I want to spend many more years with my wife, children, grandchildren, and good friends. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.” That is Mark's prayer of faith, not of doubt. As we pray for his healing, both Mark and I have total confidence, faith, that God is able to heal. We have total confidence that God desires his ultimate and eternal good. What we don't have is confidence that we know what that ultimate and eternal good is. We have faith in God, but not in ourselves. We believe the Lord will give only good gifts to his children. But we do not believe we always know what those good gifts are. So we pray, “Father, I want healing now, nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.”

Friends, that night Jesus went to the garden where he would pray and be arrested is perhaps the darkest night in the history of the world. Yet, in the midst of the darkness, what Jesus said and did provides powerful light that encourages and guides us, even in midst of what may seem like a very dark time. May the Lord help us find that encouragement and enable us to follow his example today.