

Main Idea: To help us appreciate the agony Jesus endured for us in the Passion Week, we're going to ponder three things regarding Jesus's experience in Gethsemane in Matthew 26:36-46.

I. Ponder what Jesus *did* at Gethsemane (36-38).

- A. He prepared Himself.
 - 1. He was about to experience His greatest agony.
 - 2. He did experience great distress.
- B. He prepared His disciples.
 - 1. He helped them face the hour of sorrow.
 - 2. He helped them to interpret the hour of sorrow.

II. Ponder what Jesus *said* at Gethsemane (39-46).

- A. He prayed to His Father (39).
 - 1. His words indicate intimacy.
 - 2. His words indicate dread.
 - 3. His words indicate submission.
- B. He taught the disciples (40-41).
- C. He prayed two more times to His Father (42-44).
 - 1. Prayer involves seeking the Father's will.
 - 2. Prayer involves accepting the Father's will.
- D. He expressed His resolve (45-46).
 - 1. He who sleeps, slips.
 - 2. He who prays, perseveres.

III. Ponder what Jesus *deserves* because of Gethsemane.

- A. We must believe.
- B. We must worship.

Today is Palm Sunday and before us is Passion Week. As you know, it was during this week nearly two thousand years ago that the Son of God endured unthinkable pain and agony in order to rescue us from the wrath of God that we deserve. As you also know, it's so easy for us to take that which is so familiar *for granted*.

To help us appreciate the passion of our Savior, I want us to do some pondering this morning. I want us to slow down and go back. I want us to remember, and specifically, to ponder what Jesus suffered the night before His crucifixion.

We're going to travel to Gethsemane. *Gethsemane*. Perhaps other than the Cross itself, no other event in the life of the Man of Sorrows reveals the agony He endured more vividly than Gethsemane. Jesus suffered for us beyond what our finite minds can fathom. So great was His pain there that Luke's gospel records that He sweat as it were drops of blood (Luke 22:44).

We're going to ponder three things regarding Jesus's experience in Gethsemane in Matthew 26:36-46; what He *did* at Gethsemane, what He *said* at Gethsemane, and what He *deserves* because of Gethsemane.

The event we will consider is sacred. One commentator has said, "This is a passage we almost fear to read, for it seems to intrude into the private agony of Jesus."²

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For another development of this text, see the sermon preached at WBC on 3/10/02 called, "The Agony of Gethsemane."

² Barclay, 343.

It's significant that each of the four gospel writers mention that Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane. John does not tell us what happened there, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke do.

Let's talk for a moment about the setting of Gethsemane. Matthew tells us that Jesus began His final week of earthly ministry with His triumphal entry on Sunday, Palm Sunday (in chapter 21). Then, on Monday, He cleansed the temple (also in ch 21). The religious leaders challenged Him on Tuesday. As He was leaving the temple, the disciples called attention to the massive structure of Herod's temple (Matt. 24:1). In response Jesus delivered what we commonly call the "Olivet Discourse," which occupies Matthew 24-25.

The time sequence of the events that followed is not easy to reconstruct. According to the first verses of Matthew 26, two days prior to Passover the chief priests and scribes made the decision to kill Jesus when a suitable time came. But never assume that Jesus' death was a quirk of fate. It wasn't.

"The Passover is two days away," Jesus told His disciples in 26:2, "and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified." Jesus knew the Cross was coming. In fact, it's why He came.

In verses 6-13, Jesus was anointed for burial at Bethany. And verse 13 makes it clear that Jesus saw beyond His death to the result of His death, announcing that the gospel would reach the world.

At that point, according to verse 14, Judas, incensed by what he considered a waste of money, left and set in motion his wicked plot to betray Jesus. Jesus then instituted the Lord's Supper in verses 17-30. Afterwards, the group sang a hymn, left the upper room, and headed for the Mount of Olives.

The mood became very solemn when Jesus revealed two heart-sinking predictions. The first, one would betray him (21). That, of course, was Judas. The second, all would deny him, including Peter (31-35). And with those sobering predictions in the disciples' ears, the group arrived at Gethsemane.

And we join them. We're going to ponder three things, first...

I. Ponder what Jesus *did* at Gethsemane (36-38).

Notice verse 36, "Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane." Gethsemane is Hebrew and means "press of oils." It was a garden located somewhere on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives, a hill filled with olive trees and olive presses.³ It was one of Jesus' favorite spots, a place where He could retreat to be alone with His Father (Luke 22:39).

What happened at Gethsemane that night? In the darkness of the night, a twofold preparation occurred.

A. He prepared Himself. "For what?" you ask. Please look ahead to verse 39 and you'll see. "May this cup be taken from me," said Jesus. What does Jesus mean by "this cup?" The language is symbolic and grows out of the Old Testament. It refers to the suffering and death He will face, yes, but it goes beyond that. Here "the cup" refers primarily to the personal experience of God's wrath.⁴

³ Wessel, 763

⁴ Carson, 543

In Gethsemane Jesus is preparing Himself. He knows what's coming. He knows that...

1. *He was about to experience His greatest agony.* Let's listen to the account in verses 36-38, "Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.'"³⁷ He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him [that is, He left the other eight, and took the inner circle of three], and he began to be sorrowful and troubled.³⁸ Then he said to them, 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.'"

Those words speak of great, grievous agony, and they cause us to raise a question. All throughout His ministry, Jesus calmly said He was going to die. Why now is He greatly amazed, and even depressed [that's the word Schofield uses]? Other martyrs have faced death, in fact, many with great courage. Polycarp, for instance, went to be burned at the stake without flinching. Why does Jesus here exhibit such dread at the thought of His death?

Beloved, it was not death per se over which Jesus agonized. It was something far more horrid. The agony Jesus felt in Gethsemane was not merely the dread of physical suffering and dying—again, many men have faced torture and martyrdom. But none have ever drunk *the cup* that was before Him. He knew that in a few hours He would experience the horror of being separated from the Father, that soon He would cry, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" It was for that "cup" that Jesus prepared Himself in Gethsemane, the cup of God's wrath, of hell itself.

Oswald Sanders comments, "We can never fathom the agony in Gethsemane, but at least we need not misunderstand it. It is the agony of God and Man in one, face to face with sin. We know nothing about Gethsemane in personal experience. Gethsemane and Calvary stand for something unique; they are the gateway into Life for us.

"It was not the death on the cross that Jesus feared in Gethsemane; He stated most emphatically that He came on purpose to die. In Gethsemane He feared lest He might not get through as Son of Man. He would get through as Son of God—Satan could not touch Him there; but Satan's onslaught was that He would get through as an isolated Figure only; and that would mean that He could be no Saviour."⁵

Sometimes people talk about having their own "Gethsemane experiences." I can assure you, there is only one Gethsemane experience. No one has ever faced what Jesus faced.

Bernard of Clairvaux contemplated this "cup" our Lord drank and said:

*O sacred Head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down,
now scornfully surrounded with thorns Thine only crown;
How pale Thou art with anguish, with sore abuse and scorn,
how does that visage languish, which once was bright as morn!*

But it wasn't just something future that Jesus dreaded in Gethsemane. Indeed, in Gethsemane...

2. *He did experience great distress.* He did—present tense. Listen to what He said in verse 38, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

Please don't assume that because Jesus is God, pain didn't affect Him. I remind you that He is God incarnate, and as such He is 100% man. Never forget that. When God the

⁵ Chambers, Oswald, *My Utmost for His Highest*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers) 1989.

Son became a man, He laid aside the independent exercise of His divine attributes. He chose to feel the full weight of human pain, dread, and agony. The NEB is vivid, "My heart is ready to break with grief."

In verse 37 the text indicates he began to be "sorrowful and troubled." The latter term means "great distress or anguish," even "depressed." In fact, this is the strongest of the three Greek words in the NT for depression.

Let His words sink in. He told His disciples He was "overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." It seems that Jesus' distress was so great that He nearly died in Gethsemane. Luke's description is heart-wrenching (22:44), "And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly; and His sweat was, as it were, great drops of blood falling down to the ground." An angel was sent to sustain Him (Luke 22:43).

D. A. Carson makes this observation (543), "Jesus did not suffer martyrdom...Jesus went to his death knowing that it was his Father's will that he face death completely alone as the sacrificial, wrath-averting Passover Lamb. As his death was unique, so was his anguish; and our best response to it is hushed worship."

But it wasn't just Himself that Jesus prepared in Gethsemane. Secondly...

B. He prepared His disciples. Why did Jesus bring Peter, James, and John with Him to Gethsemane? Why did He tell them to tarry and keep watch? Two key reasons seem likely.

1. *He helped them face the hour of sorrow.* Remember, Jesus has already predicted that His hour of sorrow will be an hour of sorrow for them, too. They will all abandon Him out of fear. He wanted them to be with Him—yes, He desired the encouragement of their presence. But this was for their benefit, too. By allowing them to watch Him, Jesus was helping His followers know how to face their own times of trial that stood before them.

And furthermore...

2. *He helped them to interpret the hour of sorrow.* Jesus wanted His disciples to know the truth about what happened to Him in Gethsemane. He did not hide the truth from them. He let them see the anguish He bore. He let them hear the groanings of His soul. Why? For one reason, so they would know the depths of the suffering He was about to endure to redeem His people. For another reason, it was because when He was gone, they would be the instruments He would use to pass the truth on to the world.

What happened at Gethsemane? Jesus prepared Himself and His disciples. That's what He *did*. Now let's ponder something else.

II. Ponder what Jesus *said* at Gethsemane (39-46).

In the Gethsemane experience, we find Jesus speaking to two audiences.

A. **He prayed to His Father (39).** Verse 39 begins, "Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed." The typical posture of prayer for a Jew was standing with arms outstretched. But what was Jesus' position here? The burden and agony was so great, He could not stand up. "Physical position tells spiritual condition."⁶ Jesus fell to His face. He took the posture of anguish. And from there He prayed that, if possible, the hour might pass from Him.

Notice the very words He prayed. We can make three observations from them.

⁶ Frederick Bruner, *Matthew*, p. 982.

1. His words indicate intimacy. Jesus began His prayer in verse 39 with these words, "My Father." In the parallel account of Mark 14:36, the text reads "Abba, Father." The word "Abba" is Aramaic, and is an intimate term. The Jews would not use this term to refer to God because they thought it disrespectful.⁷ Our word "Daddy" comes close. There was *intimacy* in His words.

2. His words indicate dread. He prayed (39), "If it is possible, may this cup be taken from me." The two most dreadful cries ever to come from our Savior's lips were the cry of the cup, and the cry of dereliction.⁸ The first was uttered here at Gethsemane ("Take this cup from Me"), the second at Golgotha ("My God, My God, why?"). Jesus dreaded the cup of judgment He was about to drink.

3. His words indicate submission. Verse 39 again, "Yet not as I will, but as you will." Those who preach the health and wealth gospel tell us it's always possible to have bad things removed. Jesus' prayer proves otherwise. He knew the plan of God involved intense suffering. And He chose to submit His will to His Father's will. Perfect submission.

There's a second audience in Gethsemane. First, Jesus prayed to His Father. Then...

B. He taught the disciples (40-41). Here's how (40-41), "Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. 'Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?' he asked Peter. ⁴¹ 'Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.'"

Many years ago I was awakened in the middle of the night by one of our daughters, who was afraid because of a nightmare and couldn't sleep. I stumbled to her bedside to try to comfort her, but quite honestly, I could hardly keep my eyes open! I thought of the disciples in Gethsemane.

It had been a long, exhausting day for Jesus' followers, and there, in the cool night air, they dozed off. Luke's parallel says they were sleeping from sorrow (Luke 22:45). Then their Master's voice startled them. "Watch and pray," Jesus told Peter. "If you want to overcome temptation, watch and pray."

The same goes for us. Why? "Because the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Listen, if we are serious about overcoming sin, we'd better take heed to Jesus' admonition, "Watch (be alert) and pray." Both verbs are imperatives. No watching and praying, no withstanding temptation.

How long did Jesus agonize in prayer? Verse 40 suggests that His first season of prayer lasted about an hour. He prayed two more times as well, as we'll see (verses 42 & 44), and all three times the disciples fell asleep (Mark 14:40 indicates that after the second time the disciples were so embarrassed they didn't know what to say).

I would suggest that the disciples learned some amazing lessons that night in Gethsemane—about Jesus, about prayer, and about how to suffer.

Verse 40 indicates that Jesus specifically addressed Peter. Why Peter? Remember Peter's claim back in verse 35? It's as if Jesus is saying, "Peter, you said you wouldn't deny me. But you won't even pray with me!" It takes more than good intentions to overcome temptation.

It's true, my friend. If we're going to overcome temptation, we're going to have to give more than lip-service to prayer. Churches today are filled with weak, professing

⁷ Wessel, 764

⁸ Bruner, 977

followers of Christ. If you compare their lives with their unsaved neighbors, you don't see much difference. Maybe I'm describing you. What's needed? The same thing Jesus said the disciples needed. We need to *watch and pray* as though our lives depend on it—which in fact, they do. We can't give God a token hour a week and expect to be a strong Christian.

Let's keep listening to what Jesus said in Gethsemane. First He prayed to His Father. Then He taught the disciples. Next...

C. He prayed two more times to His Father (42-44). “He went away a second time and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.’⁴³ When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy.⁴⁴ So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.”

There's a progression in Jesus' prayers. In His first prayer He said, “If it is possible, may this cup pass from me.” In other words, “Is there another way?” The thought of being separated from His Father was unbearable. In His second prayer, however, He said, “If it is *not* possible for this cup to be taken away, may Your will be done.” Jesus here models for us two important elements of effective prayer.

Prayer involves *seeking* the Father's will, and then *accepting* it...

1. *Prayer involves seeking the Father's will.* That's what He did in His first prayer. He was *seeking* the Father's will.

2. *Prayer involves accepting the Father's will.* That was His second prayer. Once we discern the Father's will, we must *accept* it. “Thy will be done,” Jesus taught us to pray, “on earth as it is in heaven.”

Seeking the Father's will, and then accepting it. That's how our Savior prayed and lived, and that's how we are to pray and live.

By the way, keep in mind the fact that Matthew had a specific purpose when he wrote this gospel. Matthew wrote this account of Jesus for second generation Christians. He knew many of the Christians in his day were facing martyrdom. He also knew they struggled with how to prepare themselves for their impending execution. So with his pen, Matthew took them to Gethsemane to see how the Master faced His hour of sorrow, and how He helped the three apostles prepare for the same.

It's amazing to me that even in Gethsemane, Jesus took time to teach His disciples. Though facing His own hour of greatest need, Jesus still thought of His followers. What does this say to us about how much He loves us? There is no greater love, my friend.

It was at this point that Jesus said something else in Gethsemane—in verses 45-46.

D. He expressed His resolve (45-46). “Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, ‘Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.⁴⁶ Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!’”

Do you hear the determination in Jesus' final words? It's no longer, “If possible let this cup pass.” Now it's, “Let's go!” It wasn't to flee, but to meet the mob. Jesus didn't try to hide or escape. He accepted the Father's plan and now He sets out to meet His betrayer head-on.

I see a contrast at Gethsemane, a contrast between Jesus and the disciples. And in this contrast I see two lessons portrayed.

1. *He who sleeps, slips.* Which is exactly what the disciples did. Instead of praying, they slept. And then they slipped. They did what they said they'd never do.

They deserted their Master. They failed to heed the second lesson, the one Jesus modeled...

2. *He who prays, perseveres.* The disciples failed, but Jesus was faithful. He did exactly what His Father gave Him to do. At Gethsemane, Jesus prepared to give Himself both TO sinners, and FOR sinners. Such was His resolve.

And now we enter the picture. We've considered what Jesus *did* at Gethsemane. And what He *said*. Thirdly, and most importantly...

III. Ponder what Jesus *deserves* because of Gethsemane.

We have two responsibilities in light of what He did.

A. We must believe. Do you know why Jesus endured Gethsemane? The simple answer is this. *He took our place.* It was our sin that made Gethsemane necessary. It was the cup of wrath due to us into which He looked at Gethsemane.

What should we do then in light of Gethsemane? We must believe that He did it for us. Have you ever prayed to God the following prayer? "Dear Lord, I believe that when You suffered in Gethsemane and on the Cross, You did it to take my place. You took the agony I deserve because I am a sinner. I can never repay You, but today, I choose to believe in You. I believe that You died for my sins and that later You conquered the grave. I now receive You as the Savior and Lord of my life."

Have you believed in Jesus Christ? Acts 16:31 says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved."

B. We must worship. Every one of us ought to respond in humble worship this morning. Our hearts ought to cry out, "Thank You, Lord Jesus, for what You did for us. You are worthy."

But not just this morning. Let's worship Jesus throughout The Passion week in front of us. Let's think about what He went through day by day, on Monday in the temple, on Tuesday with the religious leaders, on Wednesday as arrangements were set in place for His betrayal, Worship Him, for He endured it all for us!

Worship Him on Thursday as He goes to the upper room, washes the disciples' feet and participates in the last supper, and then heads to Gethsemane. And then comes the horrid flogging early Friday morning, and the crucifixion. Worship Him as He bears the awful load.

And then they placed Him in the tomb. He went there, too, for us, and deserves our worship.

And He left that tomb on Sunday morning. Worship Him!

But of course, not just this week alone. He deserves our worship every week and every day of every week. Let us worship Him with our lips and our lives.

*Man of Sorrows,
what a name for the Son of God, who came
ruined sinners to reclaim!
Hallelujah, what a Savior!*