

Agony in Gethsemane: The Cup, the Cry, and the Cross (Part 3)

Introduction

The Text

³⁹ And he came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him.

⁴⁰ And when he came to the place, he said to them, “Pray that you may not enter into temptation.” ⁴¹

And he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, and knelt down and prayed, ⁴² saying, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.” ⁴³ And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. ⁴⁴ And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. ⁴⁵ And when he rose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation.” (Luke 22:39–46)

Part 3: The Cry (Cont’d)

- A. At this church, we’ve tried to place as much a priority on prayer as we can. We understand, as we’ve said many times, that “prayer is the start of everything good.” Prayer is the engine that moves the machinery of God’s mission. It’s the powerline that runs from the storehouse of God’s strength on down to His church.
 - 1. We know it’s important. But, if we’re honest, we often still struggle with it. We know we should do it, but we don’t always know how.
- B. And here’s why I wanted to devote an entire week to this subject with regard to Jesus here in Gethsemane. Who better to learn the way of prayer from than our Savior Himself?
 - 1. In Luke’s Gospel, we are told regularly that Jesus is off praying and giving Himself to prayer through the night and things like this. But this is one of the only places where we are told explicitly what He’s praying and how He actually went about it. So it’s worth a pause. It’s worth deeper reflection. We can learn much from Him here.
- C. This sermon comes in the middle of a little mini-series on this text we’ve entitled: Agony in Gethsemane, The Cup, the Cry, and the Cross.
 - 1. We’ve looked at the Cup now.
 - 2. And last week we started in on this idea of the Cry—and really by this I’m simply thinking of the blood-earnest prayers we see here lifted up by Jesus to His Father.
 - a. Last time we looked at that fact that He prayed and we considered also why He prayed.
 - b. But this morning now, we are simply going to consider how He prayed.

- i. And for this I've got five qualities I'll bring out. I won't give them to you up front, you'll just have to sit on the edge of your seat as we unfold them one by one.

Quality #1: He Prayed with Humble Desperation

A. To get at this point, here's a bit of background you need to have in place first.

1. The standard posture for prayer today is a bit different than it was in Jesus' day. In our day when we think of a praying, it's likely we think of a person on their knees, or something like this. On the ground. Bowed in reverence, right?
 - a. But, according to my research on the subject, in Jesus' day this was not the case. The standard posture for prayer among the Jews was actually standing with eyes raised to heaven, perhaps with arms outstretched, something like this.
 - b. But here, if you noticed, in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus breaks with cultural norms and we're told in [v. 41](#) that He "[knelt down and prayed](#)." Matthew's account takes it even further for us saying that He didn't just kneel down but He "[fell on his face and prayed](#)" ([Matt. 26:39](#)).
 - i. His knees and face are in the dirt here. Jesus' prayer took up the posture not of composure, not of civility, but of humble desperation. He felt deep in His bones: "I need, I must have, my Father's help."

B. And such is the essence of prayer. Jesus has been trying to teach us this throughout the gospel to this point. I thought at this point of the parable He told in [Luke 18](#) about the Pharisee and the tax collector.

1. The Pharisee prayed more along the line of custom, standing at the front of the temple, with his head held high, trumpeting his accomplishments, "thanking" God for them of course.
 - a. It would seem from the outside a good enough prayer, but for Jesus it misses the mark entirely. Why?
 - i. There's no desperation for God here. This is too clean, too self-respecting. It's not messy enough, it's not on-the-floor-broken enough. No! Jesus doesn't commend this man.
2. Instead He turns our eyes to the tax collector, and what a scandalous thing this would be. But, nonetheless, there he is, Jesus says, not in the front putting on a show, but in the back, getting real. He can't even lift his eyes up, he's beating his chest, pleading with God: "[God, be merciful to me, a sinner!](#)" ([v. 13](#)).
 - a. And Jesus says: "That's the guy who gets it! That's a prayer that gets past the ceiling and draws out the affection and approval of my Father." It's a prayer uttered in humble desperation.

- C. I thought of that old hymn *Rock of Ages*: “Rock of Ages, cleft for me, / let me hide myself in thee; / let the water and the blood, / from thy wounded side which flowed, / be of sin the double cure; / save from wrath and make me pure. // Not the labors of my hands / can fulfill thy law’s demands; / could my zeal no respite know, / could my tears forever flow, / all for sin could not atone; / thou must save, and thou alone. // Nothing in my hand I bring, / simply to the cross I cling; / naked, come to thee for dress; / helpless, look to thee for grace; / foul, I to the fountain fly; / wash me, Savior, or I die.”
1. That’s the sort of quality our prayers should have. “If I don’t have Your help, it’s over for me!”
- D. And yet I wonder: When’s the last time you’ve really prayed like this, with this kind of desperation and passion, to the extent that you’d almost be embarrassed a bit if someone else saw you?
1. Perhaps that’s why Jesus goes on to be by Himself, right? “And he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw” (v. 41).
 - a. Not because He’s embarrassed like we might be, but because if you’re going to pray like this, you’ve got to really get alone with God. You’re not going to do this in a coffee shop or whatever. You feel it in your bones. I’ve got to cry out to my Father! I desperately need His help.

Quality #2: He Prayed with Familial Affection

- A. By this I simply mean to draw your attention to the way Jesus’ prayer begins here. Do you see it there in v. 42: “^{41b} [He] knelt down and prayed, ^{42a} saying, “Father . . .”
- B. Mark’s account alone provides us with the likely Aramaic that Jesus would’ve actually spoken in: “And he said, “Abba, Father . . .” (Mark 14:36).
1. Some have tried to make the term “Abba” a nursery word equivalent to “Daddy” or something like this, but this idea has been shown to be a bit of an overstatement.
 2. What is clear though is that this word does suggest a striking degree of intimacy and affection. It does seem true that orthodox Jews at the time avoided the idea of calling YHWH by this title Abba because of the informal, familial, intimate and seemingly to them, therefore, irreverent or even disrespectful connotations.
 - a. But here Jesus is, at the outset of His prayer here, addressing God as His “Father.”
- C. And lest we think that this is a prerogative only to be enjoyed by Jesus who was in fact the true and only beloved Son of God, well, remember that Jesus Himself taught His disciples (and by extension us) to begin our prayers in the very same way: “When you pray, say: ‘Father . . .’” (Luke 11:2).
1. For Him approaching God in such a way is not irreverent or disrespectful, it’s absolutely essential. It’s the starting point to a healthy prayer life.

- D. But why? Well, think about it. Approaching God in our prayers as Father, immediately corrects a number of our false assumptions about what prayer is.
1. We can think of prayer as an empty ritual, we just repeat words. We do it because we're told to, but our hearts aren't truly in it. (I remember praying like this around the dinner table as a kid: "'Bless us O Lord and these they gifts . . .' There I did it, now just let me eat already!")
 2. We can think of prayer as almost a sort of Christian magic, where we say prayers or quote Scripture like spells and then, if we get the incantations right, something good happens in our lives.
 3. We can think of prayer merely in utilitarian terms. We pray because it "works," because it gets God to do something for us. And if it doesn't "work," well, we don't see the point in doing it.
 4. We can see prayer as a clash of the titans, it's where I go to do battle with God and get Him to bless me.
 5. We can see prayer as a way of putting a few spiritual notches on my belt, we do it to build up our righteousness and feel good about ourselves.
 6. We can see prayer as a sort of Christianized form of new age meditation. I pray to clear my mind of unhelpful thoughts and center myself and practice mindfulness or whatever.
 - a. But all of these miss the mark of what prayer is in its essence. And it's this little word "Father" that instantly corrects them all.
- E. With this word, we are reminded that prayer, at its bottom, is about relationship. It's the place of adoration, intimacy, security, trust, affection. It's about chatting it up with your Father who loves you and cares for you.
1. It immediately sets prayer in a relational context of mutual love—where God is still God, He's still above us, He's still in charge, He's still all-powerful and almighty, but He's not some dictator in the sky who's attention we're trying desperately to get . . . He's our Dad. And He loves us. You don't have to twist His arm to bless you. He wants to bless you.
- F. Again, this is what Jesus has been trying to teach us about prayer all along, [Luke 11:11-13](#): "¹¹What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent;¹² or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" He wants to give good gifts to you. That's what it means for Him to be your Father.
- G. But we have to ask: Does this sort of familial affection mark your prayer life? Who do you imagine you're talking to?
1. Do you see a Dictator in the sky with His arms crossed, looking at His watch, urging you to hurry up and make your case so He can move on?
 2. Or do you see a Father with open lap and open arms, excited that you've made time to approach and pour out your heart to Him?

Quality #3: He Prayed with Uncensored Honesty

- A. This one brings together what we've seen thus far.
1. If we are truly desperate for God, on the one hand;
 2. and if we know we have in God a Father who loves us, on the other hand;
 3. well then we don't come in trying to clean ourselves up or edit our feelings or downplay our desires, or trying to perform or impress. No! We come in with uncensored honesty, expressing the stuff that's really on our hearts.
- B. And that's what we see Jesus doing here in Gethsemane, right? It's unmistakable! He doesn't move towards His Father here with trepidation or concern for how He's going to sound. He's just real. Almost embarrassingly so.
1. As we saw last week, it looks like Jesus is some sort of a Schizophrenic. He's known all along He's come to drink down this cup on behalf of sinners, for their salvation, and yet here He is begging His Father to take it from Him.
 - a. You see it there in the latter part of v. 42: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me." "That would be," as He goes on to say, "my will." "I don't want to do this. I'm not holding that back. Let it be known."
- C. He's not worried about what His Father will think. He's not even worried about what His disciples will think when they hear Him pray this way.
1. Indeed, He's still teaching them and us here what authentic prayer looks like. This isn't prayer in the ivory tower, this is prayer in street, prayer down in the gutters of reality, where life is hard, and we get tossed around.
 - a. He knows prayer is nothing if it isn't real and honest. In prayer we take our honest struggles to a loving Father, and find help in our time of need. Anything short of that isn't prayer at all, it's a religious performance or something else.
 - i. And God isn't impressed. He already knows how you're feeling, what you're facing. And He wants you to talk to Him about it.
- D. I wonder if you've noticed the uncensored honesty of the Psalms? Again, we're almost embarrassed by the things they say. And yet the Psalter is the hymnal of ancient Israel. This wasn't just one man's journal or something. These were things God preserved and wanted His people to sing back to Him.
1. Listen in to some of the ways they would talk:
 - a. "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Ps. 13:1).

- b. “²³ Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever! ²⁴ Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?” (Ps. 44:23–24).
- c. “How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever? Will your jealousy burn like fire?” (Ps. 79:5).
- d. “Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?” (Ps. 89:49).

- i. And on and on it goes. And I’m sure you’ve felt like this at times. But I wonder if you’ve ever felt free enough in the loving presence of God to ever vocalize it to Him?

E. But you say, “Okay well and good, but I know in all these Psalms, while it sounds like they are being honest in their despair and in their discouragement they always end up pep-talking themselves into positivity in the end. It’s like they put on the plastic smile and all is good a few verses later. I don’t move that fast. I pray like this and I still feel it when I get up off my knees. I’m not always better. So you say that God wants uncensored honest Nick but c’mon, really? He wants me to get over it quick, pick myself up and move on. He wants me to be real . . . but to a point.”

- 1. To which I would respond, have you not read [Ps. 88](#)? You are right that the majority of Psalms show the Psalmist working through hardship and end on a higher note. But not [Ps. 88](#). If anything, by the time it’s done, the darkness has only deepened.

- a. Now, I don’t have time to read the whole thing here, you should that on your own this week, but I will at least show you how it ends. Listen to the last stanza there: “¹³ But I, O LORD, cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. ¹⁴ O LORD, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? ¹⁵ Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am helpless. ¹⁶ Your wrath has swept over me; your dreadful assaults destroy me. ¹⁷ They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in on me together. ¹⁸ You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness” (vv. 13–18).
“Darkness is my only companion. Thanks a lot God!” And it just ends.

F. You say, ah what a downer! Why would God ever inspire such a thing. And moreover why would He ever want His people singing it?

- 1. Well, don’t you see? It’s because this will be your reality sometimes. And He doesn’t want you thinking you have to hide it from Him or censor yourself or pick yourself up in your own strength before you come back into pray.
 - a. He wants you to fall towards Him in prayer—struggle towards Him, doubt towards Him, fear towards Him, get angry towards Him, be real with Him. That’s the point!
 - i. Prayer is not the place we turn when once we’ve regained our composure and feel better spiritually or whatever. Prayer is the place we run to regain our composure. We talk to God about our dizziness and our sin and our struggles and our fears . . . and He puts us on more stable ground!

- G. We fear that if we vocalize these things it means we're falling away, but what I need for you to see is that it's in saying these things in prayer to God that we're actually kept from falling away. Being honest and prayerfully processing in God's presence is how we are renewed in our strength and our faith.
 - 1. Don't you see, Jesus praying here "Take this cup from Me"—it looks like He's going over the edge here, but really it's the means by which God will renew His resolve to take up this cup and drink it down for the salvation of sinners.
- H. One last thing I'd say on this: You really don't have a choice. If your feelings, your fears, desires, struggles, internal tensions don't come out in prayer to God then they will just come out in other less helpful even destructive ways.
 - 1. I experienced this personally even just a few weeks ago.
 - a. I got some stressful news on my day off, and it's family day, and I refused to think about it, to prayerfully process it, I just kind of stuffed it down. And during the day I was fine. But then that night, in the middle of the night, I wake up, anxious, burdened, thinking about it. Couldn't go back to sleep.
 - b. I hadn't processed the news honestly before the Lord and so it didn't just go away, it came out in another more destructive way. For some of us, it may come out in form of addictions, irritability, physical ailments, etc. Because we've got this stuff that we haven't worked through with the Lord in prayer.
 - c. So the next day I spend time wrestling with God about it. And He starts to bring my will into conformity with His. And the next night, I slept like a baby.
 - i. So it's going to come out one way or another. It's so much more productive to talk to your Father about it. He loves you. He can help.

Quality #4: He Prayed with Earnest Persistence

- A. I have to be quick on this one but I at least wanted to give it a moment of airtime. Jesus doesn't approach prayer as this sort of one-and-done thing. He doesn't ask His Father for help and then, if that doesn't pan out, He resorts to plan B or C. No, prayer is plan A, B, and C. It's all He's got. So He keeps going at it, with earnest persistence.
- B. We see this in our text a couple of ways.
 - 1. The first is a bit more inaccessible for those that don't know the original language. But the verbs translated "[prayed](#)" in [v. 41](#) and [v. 44](#) are in the imperfect tense which signifies the ongoing nature of this action. He continued to pray indefinitely. That's the idea.
 - 2. But then we're told as much even explicitly here. For Jesus prays in [v. 41](#). And then we come down to [v. 41](#) and we read this: "[And being in agony he prayed more earnestly](#)" ([Luke 22:44](#)). It's not that He prayed once and then when the agony only got worse He gave up and went to something else, no He prayed all more earnestly. And that word "[earnestly](#)" in

the Greek means *eagerly, fervently, constantly . . . in a persevering way* (BDAG). Hence the idea of earnest persistence here.

- a. And of course the other gospel accounts make this all the more explicit as they Jesus prayed all three separate occasions that this cup be taken from Him (cf. [Matt. 26:36-46](#)).
- C. So I wonder: Have you grown hopeless in prayer? Have you given up? Do always have contingency plans? Things you fall back on if prayer doesn't work out as a way of getting what you want? Or are you all in?
 - 1. And this really leads to the last quality I'd bring out . . .

Quality #5: He Prayed with Total Surrender

- A. Jesus doesn't have contingency plans to get His way or whatever, because if His Father says, "No," at the end of the day, that's what He wants too. He trusts His Dad to make the right call. He surrenders totally to Him, come what may.
- B. That's what we see in that incredible closing line of His prayer there at the end of [v. 42](#): "[Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.](#)"
 - 1. It's enough to give you chills. The strength of faith put on display here. Everything in Him wants to sidestep the cross, the cup of wrath, and go at it some other way, but He yields His will to His Father's. That's ultimately what He wants: "[Nevertheless, not my will, but yours . . .](#)"
- C. You know, I was surprised to see how the commentators interpreted what was happening here in Gethsemane. I don't think I'd realized the gravity of what Jesus is dealing with here. I've been so mesmerized by the cross and Calvary, I don't think I've realized the full significance of Gethsemane. Listen to the way they describe it . . .
 - 1. The first commentator, reflecting on Jesus' sweating of blood and things, writes this: "[Jesus' inner torment manifests itself in physical trauma. Dripping blood would be expected to describe the crucifixion, but no blood attends that narrative. The most intense description of Jesus' suffering in the Gospels occurs not at Golgotha but at Gethsemane, in his decision to submit to the Father's redemptive will.¹²⁵ On the Mount of Olives, Jesus' soul is crucified; on the Mount of Calvary, his body is surrendered](#)" (PNTC).
 - 2. Another commentator writes the following: "[Jesus' struggle on the Mount of Olives is presented by Luke as the watershed in the passion narrative, the critical point at which faithfulness to the divine will is embraced definitively in the strenuousness of prayer](#)" (Green, Luke, 777).
 - 3. And finally one more: "[At Gethsemane Jesus did not drink the cup; He consented to drink it.](#)" [Godet] [The real battle was fought here](#)" (TNTC).
 - a. I had never seen Gethsemane this way. It's through wrestling prayer in Gethsemane that the deal is sealed. The real battle is waged here. Here's where the Son puts His

heel to the serpent's neck. This is the D-day beachhead as it were. Jesus writes the check in Gethsemane that's later cashed at Calvary.

- i. Jesus emerges from this garden totally surrendered and resolved to go through with the cross.
- D. So then the question for us, of course, is: Are we praying like this? Are we fully yielded, totally surrendered? Do we have a “*nevertheless*” that conditions all of our prayers? “I want this, I ask for this . . . nevertheless not my will but Yours be done.”
 1. Or are our prayers just an ongoing list of demands?
- E. You know we're trying to teach our kids to pray, and my four year old little boy is trying his hand at it these days. And it's pretty hilarious.
 1. Last week we got into an all-out prayer battle, I'd say. I think I was praying over our lunch or something and I thanked God for the rain and things. And I guess he'd been frustrated by how much rain we'd been getting. He wanted to go outside and play, like any boy would. And so he interrupts my prayer and prays: “God, no make the rain stop. Amen.” I look at him. I'm not going to have this. So I pray again, “God thanks for the rain we need it, keep it coming, amen.” And he fires back. “God, stop the rain now, amen.” Sensing the growing tension I went in for the K.O. punch: “God, let it rain . . . in Jesus' name!” I dropped the hammer! I prayed in Jesus' name. He couldn't get up off the mat after that. Haha.
 2. But he'll regularly do this sort of thing. My favorite was from the other day, when I said he lost dessert because the boy took like 45 minutes to eat his salad. He takes a deep breath, lifts his eyes to heaven, and lets out a passionate prayer: “God please help daddy not to be in charge, amen.” Haha.
- F. Listen. I'm happy he's learning to come to God with His desires, but obviously we have to layer on some nuance to his understanding.
 1. This isn't exactly how prayer works. God is not our genie, or our butler, or our sugar daddy in the sky. He's our God, our King, our Lord. He's our Father, sure, but He's still the Alpha and the Omega.
 - a. We don't even want to tell Him what to do. We don't even want to act like we know what's best. That's where God takes us over time—from thinking He should listen to us to realizing we need to listen to Him. “*Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.*”
 - i. Because we come to really trust Him. Because we know that His “will” is going to be a good one, a better one, regardless of whatever it may mean for us in the immediate.
- G. “*Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.*” I wonder: Can you say that? Are you saying that? Think through the various dimensions of your life right now:

1. Think about your relationships, the ones you have and are struggling with, and the ones you don't have that you so wish you did. Can you tell God about all your desires there and yet still when it's all said and done say: "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."
 2. How about your job or your vocation, maybe in the office, maybe in the home. Pour out your heart, let God know what you want to see changed, where you desperately need help, but then can you say: "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." "If you want that girl to get the promotion instead of me, I trust you."
 3. How about with your health? "Why is this my lot—more aches and pains, more pills, another tumor to blast with chemo, take this cup from me!" "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." Can you say it? Do you trust Him and want His will above anything else in your life?
- H. We could just keep going, but you get the idea. When you run through this sort of thing you could see it as a sort of spiritual MRI.
1. Where you choke up and can't say it, or where you're really struggling to say it, you're zeroing in on an idol, which we may even refer to as spiritual cancer. There's a tumor there in your heart. We need to do some work.
 - a. What it says is when you can't surrender this over to God is that you're trusting in that thing to bring you life and satisfaction more than God. That's why you hesitate to give it over to Him. It seems better than Him.
- I. In fact, when you pray in this unsundered way, when you're just talking to God about all these things you want Him to do, I want you to understand you are really just enlisting God to help you with your god, do you see? This is the ultimate offense.
1. It would be like asking your wife to help you scan tinder profiles and help you find someone more satisfying to sleep with. It sounds offensive, and insane, but that's what it is.
- J. Of course, this doesn't mean He doesn't care about all these things in your life, as we've been saying, He wants you to come with your needs and desires.
1. But a good thing becomes a cancerous thing when it becomes an ultimate thing, or you might say, when it becomes an unsundered thing.
 - a. When you can't put it in the hands of God, you know you are holding your functional god. Lay it down.

Conclusion

- A. Let me say just two final things here as we draw this to a close:
- B. First, God always answers our prayers. Even when the answer is no, He always answers.
1. In our text, did you notice, God doesn't take the cup from Jesus, but He does provide an angel to strengthen Him for all that lay ahead.

2. And sometimes this is how it will work with us. Anyone else been saying lately with Jesus here, "Father take this cup from me. I can't bear it!"
 - a. Listen, sometimes, in mercy, God takes the cup away. And we celebrate that. You get healed. You get the job. You get the baby. Everything goes right!
 - b. Other times, in mercy, God doesn't take the cup away, but instead He gives you the strength required to drink it. "I don't want cancer. I don't want the breakup. I don't want the hardship. Make it stop!" He doesn't answer the way we want. But He always answers. He's always right there.
- C. The second and last thing I'd say is this (it's something I've said before): God is always telling a longer story. We try to interrupt Him somewhere in the middle: "I don't like this story, it's not feeling good to me right now." But let Him tell it. It always has a better ending than you or I can even think to ask for or imagine.
 1. So with Jesus, why doesn't the Father take the cup? Where is this story going?
 - a. Humiliation, rejection, suffering, death? Certainly. But that's not the end. In many ways that's just the beginning.
 - b. Resurrection is the end. Redemption is the end. Forgiveness for the sins of the world is the end. Glory and joy in eternity forever is the end. The cross, that's just a blip. Just a means, a magnificent means, to this glorious end.
 2. So let Him tell the story in your life. Even if it hurts right now, He's headed somewhere wonderful with it!