

JESUS' PRAYER AND VICTORY

Matthew 26:31-75

Key Verse: 26:39

“Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.’”

This passage is about Jesus' prayer, and his arrest and trial. There are many dramatic events, charged with emotion. Yet the outstanding image is of Jesus' anguished prayer and his victorious spirit. Jesus wants us to understand his prayer and to realize what he did for us. Jesus wants us to learn how to pray. It is the way of true victory.

First, Jesus helps his disciples with truth and a promise (31-35).

Look at verses 31-32. “Then Jesus told them, ‘This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.” But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.’” Jesus had just made a new covenant with his disciples in his blood. This covenant united them forever in the love of God. Now Jesus says, “You will all fall away.” In a matter of hours, they would run away from him like sprinters in a track meet. Jesus knew this truly, based on the Scriptures. Jesus foretold it clearly in order to help them. He wanted them to understand that their falling away fulfilled the Scriptures. Jesus' disciples make mistakes and commit sins. It is part of their growth process. Yet God's good purpose prevails. God weaves everything, their failure and success alike, into his gospel history to reveal his own glory. We must see ourselves as Jesus does. To do so, we must listen to Jesus. Jesus understood that his disciples were like sheep. When he was stricken, they would all become shaky. However, Jesus would rise again. Jesus would overcome the power of sin and death. Jesus would go ahead of them into Galilee and they would have a wonderful reunion. This promise could give them real hope. They really needed to listen to Jesus' words.

How did they respond? Peter said, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.” In one sense, Peter seems to be courageous and loyal. But in fact, Peter was rebellious. Peter did not admit his weakness. He was confident in his willpower. He thought he was better than others. Peter was proud. So he rejected Jesus' words. This drew a sharp answer from Jesus. Look at verse 34. “‘I tell you the truth,’ Jesus answered, ‘this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.’” Jesus used the word “disown.” This is worse than just falling away. Jesus knew Peter's weakness in detail, better than Peter did. In deep love and concern, Jesus wanted to plant real hope in Peter.

However, Peter declared, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” Peter rejected Jesus' word even more strongly. Jesus did not say anything more. Now Peter had to experience the truth for himself. Peter might have thought he won the argument. Peter's bold claim resonated with the other disciples and they all declared that they would lay down their lives for Jesus. It was an empty boast. They were in for a big surprise. Let's realize that Jesus knows our weakness better than we do. Jesus tells us the truth about our weakness to plant real hope in our hearts. We should listen to Jesus. Many trust their feelings or reason most. We should trust Jesus' word most.

Second, Jesus prays to obey the will of God (36-46).

Jesus was very understanding of his disciples, like a wise father. He took them to Gethsemane and found a place for them to sit down. However, to Jesus, it was time to fight a spiritual battle in prayer. Jesus took Peter, James and John with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. He said, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” Jesus wanted his disciples to understand him and support him. Here we see the humanity of Jesus.

Why was Jesus so sorrowful? It was time for Jesus to die. As a human being, Jesus did not want to die. Jesus was just 33 years old. Men must live 80 or 90 years, and then die in peace. Jesus would die violently at age 33. To any person, the desire to live in this world is strong. Two years ago, Aron Ralston, 27, got his arm trapped by a boulder while mountain-climbing in Utah. After waiting three days for rescue, he realized that no one could find him. He could die of starvation. So he used his three-inch pen knife to amputate his own arm just below the elbow. Then he walked to safety and collapsed. It was extremely painful to amputate his arm. But his desire to live was so strong that he was willing to bear this pain. Jesus wanted to live. He wanted to spend time with his loved ones, especially

his mother. But he had to die young. The thought of death made him sorrowful and lonely. Still, there was a deeper reason for Jesus' sorrow. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus had to endure God's wrath against sin in our place. To do so, he would be cut off from God and treated like a sinner. This was unbearable for Jesus. Until this time, Jesus was always joyful in his love relationship with God. But on the cross, he would feel forsaken by God, utterly alone. This broke Jesus' heart like nothing else could. When Jesus thought of this he was overwhelmed with sorrow.

What did Jesus do at this time? Look at verse 39. "Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.'" Jesus came to God in utter humiliation and prayed. Sometimes we are so overwhelmed that we don't know what to do. Jesus teaches us to fall to the ground before our Father God and pray.

Jesus called God, "My Father." Even in that time of unbearable sorrow, Jesus did not doubt the love of God. Jesus trusted God and believed God's love absolutely. The love of God is a refuge in the time of trial. God's love "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. God's love never fails" (1Co 13:7-8). Jesus accessed this love through prayer. Jesus taught us to pray, "Our Father in heaven." God is our Father who loves us no matter what. In any unbearable difficulty, we can find refuge in God's love when we say, "Our Father."

Then Jesus said, "...if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me." Jesus knew that the cup of suffering and death had been given to him by God. Jesus had foretold to his disciples that he would suffer and die to fulfill Scripture. Now Jesus asked God to change his plan, if possible. Jesus freely shared the real request of his heart with God. Jesus believed that God's love and power were boundless. However, Jesus concluded his prayer with the words, "Yet not as I will, but as you will." In the final analysis, Jesus submitted to God's will. This was not from a fatalistic determinism. Jesus believed that God's will was the best and wisest way. Jesus believed God's will would bring final victory.

After prayer, Jesus returned to his disciples. They were sleeping soundly. Luke says they were exhausted from sorrow (Lk 22:45). They were different than Jesus. When Jesus was sorrowful, he prayed to God for help. When the disciples were sorrowful, they fell into depression, and then fell asleep. Jesus asked Peter, "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" He wanted Peter to wake up, not only physically, but spiritually. In spite of his boasts, Peter was failing to keep watch. Jesus encouraged them, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation." The real enemy to the disciples was Satan. Only God can defeat this enemy. So the disciples needed to pray for God's help. They were willing to pray. But they were not used to praying. Their flesh was most uncooperative. When they wanted to pray, they only felt tired and fell asleep. Jesus said, "The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

Look at verse 42. "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.'" Now Jesus realizes that God's world salvation plan will be fulfilled only when he takes the cup. Mankind will be saved only when he takes the cup. God will crush the devil only when he takes the cup. Through prayer, Jesus resolves to take the cup according to the will of God. The bottom line in Jesus' prayer is, "May your will be done." Jesus' prayer was submission to God's will. So often, we pray to get what we want from God. We learn from Jesus that we must pray to obey God's will. Prayer transforms our will into God's will by God's power and help. Jesus prayed a third time with the same prayer topic (43-44). Even for Jesus, it was not easy. But Jesus persisted in prayer until his will became God's will. Look at verses 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. Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!'" Jesus was fully prepared. Jesus had real peace and assurance of final victory.

Third, Jesus' victory in the time of trial (47-75).

In verses 47-67 Jesus seems to be utterly defeated. He is betrayed, arrested, and tried falsely and condemned. Yet Jesus' words and actions reveal that he is most triumphant. We see this in several ways. In the first place, Jesus loved Judas the betrayer to the end. Jesus said to Judas, "Friend, do what you came for." Jesus called Judas "Friend." Jesus overcame the pain of betrayal with the infinite love of God.

In the second place, Jesus helped his disciples fight a spiritual battle. One of them drew his sword and struck a blow for Jesus, cutting off a man's ear. The disciples were willing to kill for Jesus, risking their lives. But they did not listen to Jesus. They did not pray. Now they were using human weapons in spiritual warfare. This would do more harm than good. Jesus said to them, "Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen this way?" Jesus taught his disciples that he was willing to be arrested, tried and killed to obey the will of God. Jesus taught his disciples to pray and obey the will of God. This is the way to win spiritual victory. For the last five years we have been engaged in a war on terror. We must realize that this is primarily a spiritual battle. Ultimately, it is war with the devil. Only God can win this war. So we must pray. We must obey the will of God by sending missionaries, even to Muslim countries. Then God will give us spiritual victory.

In the third place, Jesus loved the crowd of people to the end. Jesus could have ignored their fickle behavior. But Jesus said to them, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled." Jesus wanted to awaken them spiritually. They had been deceived by Satan. But even this fulfilled Scripture. Jesus wanted to open their eyes to God's salvation work.

In the fourth place, Jesus boldly proclaimed his identity as the Christ. Jesus was tried before the Sanhedrin. The verdict had already been decided. They would condemn Jesus to death. Jesus did not respond to false charges. But when the high priest asked if he were the Christ, Jesus said, "Yes, it is as you say." Though it meant the death sentence, Jesus clearly proclaimed himself to be the Christ. Look at verse 64b. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." Jesus is full of glory and power. Jesus boldly proclaimed his second coming in the power of God Almighty. Jesus declared final victory in the most adverse situation. Jesus tasted victory through prayer.

Peter makes a big contrast with Jesus (68-75). Peter followed at a distance to play it safe. He sat down in the courtyard of the high priest to see the outcome, like a spectator. Then the devil attacked him three times through the words of a servant girl, another girl, and those standing nearby. They asked him, "Weren't you with Jesus?" Each time Peter said, "I don't know the man." The third time, a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the words Jesus had spoken, "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." Peter realized that he had disowned Jesus three times, just as Jesus said he would. Jesus was right and he was wrong. Peter realized that he had been proud, rebellious, unprayerful and unspiritual. But Peter did not fall into Satan's trap and become suicidal. Instead, Peter went outside and wept bitterly. They were tears of real repentance. Peter could repent when he remembered Jesus' words. In the spiritual battle, those who fail to pray, fail period. But that is the time to remember Jesus' word and repent with tears.

In this passage we learn that Jesus prayed before the cup of suffering and death. Jesus tasted victory and took the cup, becoming our Savior. Let's thank Jesus. Let's learn to pray as Jesus did.