

Jesus' Prayer and Victory
Matthew 26:31-75
Key Verse: 26:39

by Tim McEathron

"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.'"

They say that in times of trouble a man's true character is revealed. When things are going well, we have many daydreams and bold statements in our testimonies about the great things we will do for Jesus, the students we'll teach and masses that will hear the gospel message from us. However, when we actually go out in our human strength, too often we find that we fell short of all the wonderful things we thought we would do.

In this passage Jesus gave us a beautiful glimpse into his humanity and way that he struggled in the time overwhelming sorrow. Jesus shows us that he won the victory on his knees long before he won it on the cross. And when we see how he brought his disciples to witness this, it is clear he wants us to learn this as well. Like bookends on the account of Jesus' prayer and trial, are the boasts of Peter and his eventual failure. There is a sharp contrast drawn between Jesus who struggled in prayer and won the victory and Peter who depended on his flesh and failed. How do we react when we are overwhelmed? Jesus shows us the way to rely on God. We'll think about this through Peter's self-reliance, Jesus' God-reliance and the result of each.

First, Peter relied on himself (31-35)

Look at verses 31 and 32. We have to remember the mood before this. Jesus had just finished having the most intimate time with his disciples. Jesus foretold his suffering and death saying, my body will be broken for YOU and my blood poured out for YOU. They did not understand everything but in this moment they felt more close to Jesus than ever before. In this high emotional moment, Jesus said to them "This very night you will all fall away on account of me..." There was no way they could believe it. Peter, always the most bold, replied with indignation and bravado, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." When I see Peter's emotion based on human love for Jesus I can't help but relate it to marriage. When we feel the strong feelings of filial love we think that we will always be faithful, always be strong, always be able to ride the wave of emotion through any storm. All the newlyweds understand well. But those of us who've been married a little longer realize that feelings only last so long, don't misunderstand I really love my wife, but without a daily decision to love our spouse in practical ways, I can see how my marriage could quickly fall apart. Feelings are good, but feelings cannot be our foundation. Feelings are like the plant on shallow soil that withers in the time of scorching because it has no root. (Lk 8:13) This is quite different than faith. At the center of your emotions is you, but at the center of faith is God. Peter's words were noble, they were admirable and we probably would have said the same thing. But several things should have given him pause.

One is that Jesus' words were based on the Bible. Zechariah 13:7, which Jesus quotes, says, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." Their falling away had been prophesied some 500 years before it happened in the Bible. A second, is that, amazingly, Jesus was not bothered by this. In effect Jesus said, "But after your epic failure I will meet you in Galilee and everything will be fine, don't worry, I don't hate you, I don't condemn you, I still love you and will restore you." Thirdly, it was Jesus who was saying it. He even said it a second time. Look at verse 34, "Truly [Peter] I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows you will disown me three times."

However, Peter's reaction became even more stubborn and visceral, it was like he was wearing ear plugs. "Peter declared, 'Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.'" And of course the other disciples said the same. Part of the gospel message is that we cannot save ourselves, that we are weak sinners, that we live only by the grace of God but we don't like to hear it. "If I just try harder," "If I just do more," "If I'm just more holy," are not Biblical

mindsets but set-ups for failure. At the heart of these is "I", "me", "my", and not Jesus. Reliance on myself is the opposite of faith in God. What is worst here, is that following Jesus by their feelings and self-reliance in fact led them to completely deny the truth of the Bible and reject Jesus' message. Their emotion was not beautiful, it cut them off from the truth.

Second, Jesus relied on God. (36-44)

Verse 36 says, "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.'" Gethsemane is an olive grove, where the trees are said to be thousands of years old. It is quiet and private place. Pastor Ron shared with me that, though he usually doesn't have such feelings, he felt an overwhelming urge to pray when he was there. This is the kind of place that Jesus went to in the time of trouble. Then we see that Jesus humanity began to show, verse 37 says, "...he began to be sorrowful and troubled." Always Jesus is like a majestic rock cliff, the waves smash against it and it is unmoved, eternal, perfect and unchanging. In Jesus we always see his unmistakable divinity. Great leaders usually try to hide their weaknesses to appear strong for the sake of others. However, Jesus here begins to pull back the veil and come undone before them and he did not hide this, but he had brought them specifically that they may witness it and participate in it. Let's read verse 38 together, "Then he said to them, 'my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow, even to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.'" Jesus was beginning to feel the arrows from God's quiver piercing his soul. We can only imagine the terrible sensations he began to feel as God put on him the sin of the world and the condemnation it required. Yet, Jesus understood, as he had said from Zechariah, that it was God who was striking the shepherd and God's hand that was against him. He knew it and he knew it was right, but what a weight to bear. In this moment he was becoming the drug dealer and the child abuser, the terrorist and the atheist. It must have broke God's heart to do it and been beyond anything Jesus could have imagined but the weight of generations of the wrath of God all fell on Jesus and separated him from his father God. Those who have experienced the pain of abandonment, the pain of divorce, the pain of the death of a spouse or child, can begin to understand the depth of anguish that Jesus felt, it is the worst pain in the world. Far worse than the physical pain of the cross, is the anguish of soul that our Lord bore for us.

Then it says "Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed." Jesus couldn't go any farther, but he went a little farther to the place of prayer. Look at verse 39, let's read it together. "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Among all Jesus' prayers this prayer is unique. It was not a prayer for direction as Jesus' other notable prayers were--Jesus knew what he needed to do. It was a prayer to subjugate his will to the will of God, it was the climax of his life of prayer.

Jesus revealed his raw and honest request, "My Father [Abba, Daddy] if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me." Notice here the love and trust, that there is no sense of trying to sound strong or say the right words, just real honest prayer from his heart. Though Jesus was fully God, he was also fully man and here those two natures came to a head. As a man Jesus could not do God's will but God's will had to be done. There was no plan B. Yet, God had entrusted world salvation to Jesus. It was the purpose of all God had done to that point. The whole history of the world led to the cross it is the focal point of all history and it rested on the shoulders of Jesus. As a man he did not want to die, as a man he did not want to suffer, as a man he didn't want to be humiliated and degraded and dehumanized and betrayed. Because of the image of God in us we want life, we want honor and blessing, it is natural. But here we see the divine nature of Jesus. He did not submit to those feelings. He said, "Yet not as I will, but as you will." Here Jesus was not hopelessly admitting that he was a victim of the will of God. Sometimes we hear God's will used fatalistically in prayer: "God please heal this person ...if it is your will." or "God please move this impossible mountain in my life ...but your will be done." If we say "your will be done" fatalistically, we are saying we are the victim of God's will which will inevitably happen, which I can do nothing to change. When Jesus said "your will be done", the will of God is what he truly wanted more than his will. Jesus confessed that God's will was better than his will but it was just such a struggle to accept. Though it went against every fiber of his humanity, he completely submitted himself to the perfect will of God.

This one thing really goes against our humanity. I want to be the captain of my own ship, the king of my own castle, I want Jesus to be my copilot but I'll be doing the driving thank you very much. Yet, in so doing, I proclaim that I know best and my way is better than God's. It's not until I fall on my face that I realize I was wrong and even then it

takes a great measure of humility to change. How incredible it is that Jesus could go through the necessary struggle to submit his will and accept God's will. Thank you Jesus that you accepted the will of God to pay for our sins.

And then Jesus came to his disciples, and he found them sleeping. Here their flesh was beginning to show. They said "we will die with you!!...but don't ask us to stay awake and pray with you." How often flesh cannot keep up with our big words, right? Jesus said to them, "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing but the body is weak." Spiritual maturity is being able to pray when it is time to pray, rather than avoiding the struggle. The spirit is willing but we can't possibly deal with temptation and accept God's will on our own.

Recently, God took Leah Maria Austria, the daughter of Len and Lilliana Austria, to be with him in heaven. Lilliana had carried a healthy daughter for 9 months without complication. Even days before the delivery, the baby was perfectly healthy. However, when they went in to be induced the baby had no heartbeat. Len shared in his eulogy that it was by far the worst thing that had ever happened to his life. Last year, Len's mother had died as well and Len still felt the pain of this loss and now an even worse tragedy came. We would expect him to be completely swallowed by the power of death but instead he began to struggle with God in his overwhelming sorrow. He remembered, that he doesn't own his daughter's life God does, she belongs to God and she belongs in eternity. That God has purpose and good would come of this. That God is gracious, and for 9 months they could enjoy a kicking baby. And finally, God loves them and God himself lost his son when Jesus died for us, without which we would have nothing. I think many of us left sad but incredibly encouraged. How could he have such strength in the midst of such tragedy? That kind of peace is a gift given to those who struggle with God in the time they are overwhelmed.

God who is faithful, heard Jesus' crying out prayer. God removed from Jesus the dread of the cup. God poured out his strength to stand up under it and God gave him a clear understanding of his will. Jesus' second prayer was spoken by a new man. "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." Removed from this prayer is any sense of struggle. There is no more conflict, there is no more sorrow, there is resolve, acceptance, submission and calm beyond any human measure. In one hour of prayer, Jesus laid all his burden at the foot of the throne of God and did not take it up again. Jesus took the cup, but he took it from his Father's hand. He did not take the cup from the hands of his enemies or from Satan. Because he had perfectly resolved to follow God's will, it is from God's hand alone that Jesus took the cup. It was not forced upon him and he was not a victim, he victoriously did what no man could do.

But when he came back to his disciples, again he found them sleeping. So he prayed for a third hour to have a solid decision. To a lesser extent, the disciples also were experiencing overwhelming sorrow like Jesus but they chose to sleep. Sleep is an escape. It may seem more comforting to run to some escape, like sleep, or food, or alcohol and drugs, or even friends and Facebook, excessive video games, or surfing the internet, but when we are done self-medicating and running, the problem is still there. And what was the result?

Third, the results of self-reliance and God-reliance (45-75)

When he came back, to his disciples again, Jesus 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!" Three hours earlier, Jesus was broken and barely able to stand, barely able to bear the weight of what he must do. But here we see Jesus stronger than he's ever been. From here on out Jesus was in full control of every situation he was in. In the time of prayer nothing had changed. His enemies did not get lost, God did not find another way, the disciples did not mount a resistance, yet in three hours of prayer everything changed, because Jesus changed. God could not take away the cup but wow did God hear his prayer! This incredible power, peace and resolve could have been given to the disciples as well but they failed to listen to Jesus' teaching.

When the time came, Jesus did not wait for Judas and the crowd coming to capture him, but went out to them. Peter thought he was on fire for Jesus with his little sword but in his self-reliance and emotion, he had no idea what God actually wanted him to do. But Jesus, completely in control, calmed the whole violent situation with one word. Look at verse 56. "But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled." And when the disciples saw the way he just handed himself over they fled.

At Jesus' trial the religious leaders couldn't even manage to convict Jesus. Of course human beings cannot put God on trial. Again Jesus was completely in control of even his trial and boldly declared his own death sentence. Look at verse 64, "'You have said so,' Jesus replied. 'But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.'" Because of his victory on his knees, Jesus could see past the suffering of the cross to his glorious resurrection, his ascension to the right hand of God as Sovereign ruler and the glorious day that he would come again. With this beautiful image in his heart, it is no wonder that Jesus was overflowing with strength.

In contrast, bold Peter followed at a distance. Peter who had been so bold as to say he would die with Jesus now comfortably blended in with the guards who had captured and abused Jesus. It all began to come apart in the courtyard as he was approached by what, a crowd of soldiers? No it was a small servant girl. Before a little girl he said "I would happily die with Jesus!" right? Wrong. He said, "...I don't know what you're talking about", and shuffled away inconspicuously. And then before another girl, with an oath, "I don't know the man!" And before a small group, calling down curses on himself, "I don't know the man!" Jesus was proclaiming his death sentence with victory and Peter was denying he ever knew Jesus in the courtyard! Where did the Peter who said "I will never fall away" go? The fact is that from the time Jesus had taught about his own death, Peter had become willfully stubborn. Jesus rebuked him but he didn't hear it, Jesus tried to wash him, but he resisted it, Jesus counseled him but he responded with bravado, and it finally came to a head. The fact is that Peter didn't know himself. In our sinful nature none of us knows what we are truly capable of. When we depend on ourself and refuse to struggle and refuse to pray, watch out! We have no idea what we are capable of doing when Satan works. Immediately, Peter heard the rooster crow, just as Jesus had said and finally, finally he realized.

Yet, by the grace of God, Peter remembered all of Jesus' words and he wept bitterly. Later, Peter did learn to rely on God. In 1 Peter 5 he wrote, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God...cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Be alert and of sober mind. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him...and the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you."

When I began the Disciples Chorus back in 2001, I had no idea how to teach, so I cried out in prayer and amazingly method came into my mind and I knew exactly what to do--it was an amazing experience. Later, I hit another wall as the choir got bigger and I couldn't control them. So, I got on my knees begging God to help me, and he told me to do Mozart with them. "Mozart?... they're way too young, that won't work." Well, of course they ate it up memorized in 2 practices behaving perfectly and it completely changed my philosophy of teaching. However, over time I began to think that I knew what I was doing, and I could depend on myself. God let me experience failure, kids quitting in exasperation, poor attitudes and me yelling way too much. But I kept pushing forward thinking it was my method that needed to improve. Finally, I humbled myself last semester and the kids asked me to do a musical. It's a long story why I chose it, you can read about it on the website, but I felt it was right before God. It was 2 hours long nowhere near anything we'd ever done and it seemed really, really impossible but I prayed. Every time something wasn't working or the kids were lazy, I didn't struggle with them, I just prayed. Even several weeks before the concert they didn't have their lines memorized or music learned and I was at a point where I had to choose to depend on myself and cancel the show, or depend on God and go forward. Well, it was terrifying but I depended on God and I have no idea how it happened but the main characters memorized about a hundred lines each in two weeks and the choir memorized 26 songs and it was the most amazing thing we've ever done. Why? Because when I pray, I admit, I cannot do it but God can. I submit my self-reliance to God and God does amazing things.

In this passage we see a sharp contrast between the beautiful, agonizing struggle of Jesus that ended in great victory, and the self-confidence of Peter that ended in bitter tears. I believe God framed Jesus' struggle in the story of Peter to teach us a lesson. We desperately need to struggle with God in prayer. In our human strength, there is no way we can avoid temptation, there is no way we can do the will of God, there is no way that we can ever save ourselves. Only Jesus won the victory. We must come to Jesus. We must ask Jesus to give us the strength to go through the intense battle to submit to the will of God. May God help us overcome self-reliance and experience the victory of submitting to God. Amen.