

Matthew 26E

- Our study of the passion of Jesus starts today with Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane
 - The challenge for us in studying the passion of Christ is in coming to appreciate and balance our understanding of two contrary perspectives
 - On the one hand, we need to be able to put ourselves in the place of a man facing an excruciatingly painful experience
 - What was it like to face this certain future, especially knowing exactly what it would involve?
 - What were Jesus' emotions, fears, and temptations, and how did He face them with such strength?
 - But on the other hand, we also need to understand what it means that it was also God suffering and dying
 - Did the fact that Jesus was God make this process easier for Him? Can God truly die?
 - How do we explain this seemingly impossible circumstance and do so without wandering into theological error?
 - The early church had false teachers who tried to address this challenge by claiming wrongly that Jesus wasn't God at His death
 - They said the Spirit of God left Jesus before He died so that Jesus was just a man when He died, which is contrary to the Bible
 - So without introducing such error, we want to know how Jesus endured the torment of the cross and how an eternal transcendent God died
 - And we start that journey today looking at Jesus' anticipation of that process beginning late on Wednesday night
 - Jesus and the disciples have left Jerusalem after their Passover supper and are gathered in the Garden of Gethsemane
 - The exact location of this Garden is unknown today, except we know it was somewhere on the western slope of the Mt of Olives

- The hour is late, probably near midnight, and the disciples are weary after a long day
 - Earlier Jesus dismissed Judas from the meal to allow him to betray Jesus
 - Most likely, Judas went first to the chief priests to report that Jesus liked to pray in the evenings on the Mt of Olives
 - From there, the priests would have taken Judas to the Roman authorities to seek an arrest warrant and soldiers to enforce it
- While this was going on in the city, Jesus sits awaiting His arrest in the Garden, knowing full well what was coming and being fully capable of preventing it
 - Thus began Jesus' extreme emotional and mental anguish, as He contemplates the terror that is coming and resists the urge to stop it

[Matt. 26:36](#) Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."

[Matt. 26:37](#) And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed.

[Matt. 26:38](#) Then He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me."

- As Jesus enters the Garden, He directs 8 of His disciples to stay near the entrance and pray
 - And then He takes Peter, James and John with Him further up the Mt of Olives for company in the midst of His suffering and distress
 - And that's the perspective you need to have in your mind as you imagine this scene
 - Imagine a Jesus visibly distressed, just as you would be if you were in His place and knew what was about to unfold
 - In a few hours Jesus is going to endure beatings by Roman soldiers who were trained in how to inflict maximum pain without mercy
 - Those beatings will be followed by a scourging that often brought a victim near to death from the shock and blood loss
 - And then Jesus will have a crown of thorns thrust into his scalp

- Then He will be forced to carry a beam of wood bearing down on His shredded skin, which was torture in itself
- And of course, at the end of this unbelievable torment, Jesus will be nailed to a cross to hang in excruciating pain fighting for breath
- We know these things happened because we can read about them after the fact, but even so we don't know what it's like to experience it all
 - But Jesus in His omniscience not only knew exactly what was going to happen beforehand
 - But more than that, He also knew exactly what it would *feel* like, so in effect He could feel it all even before He experienced it
- And then to add to His torture, Jesus possessed the power to stop all of it if He chose
 - In the next passage, Jesus will remark on His ability to end His own torture at any time merely by calling upon angels
 - Can you even imagine the suffering that comes with all that knowledge and power? The temptation to say no?
 - That's the state of mind Jesus has right now as He enters the Garden and awaits Judas and the Romans
 - He is distressed both by what is coming but also by His flesh's desire to say no to it
- That helps us appreciate what Matthew means when he describes Jesus' state of mind as deeply grieved to the point of death
 - You know, when our teenager says he is starving to death or she is so embarrassed she could just die, we know it's hyperbole
 - But when Jesus says He is deeply grieved to a point of death, He means it literally
 - Jesus was so disturbed by the thought of what was coming that He felt as though the stress inside Him would almost kill Him
 - For example, Luke reports that Jesus experienced a rare condition that night called hematohidrosis which is brought about by extreme stress
 - The small capillaries at the surface of the skin burst under pressure from the body's stress response

- Then blood seeps out of the body through nearby sweat glands making the person appear to be sweating blood
- Jesus experienced a kind of stress few have ever known which tells us that His anticipation that night was as much torture as the actual events
 - And Jesus has asked His disciples to accompany Him in prayer to comfort Him in His time of distress
 - Company in times of stress is comforting, but there was a larger, more important reason they needed to be there
- Notice Jesus says in v.38 that the three disciples should remain with Him to “keep watch with me...”
 - What was Jesus asking them to watch *for*? One obvious answer might be that they should watch for the approach of Judas and the soldiers
 - But that doesn’t make sense, because they didn’t know Judas was coming with soldiers
 - Moreover, why would Jesus need them to watch for that...it’s not as if He would miss Judas and the soldiers when they arrived
 - Jesus has something else on His mind and we see what that is in the next section

Matt. 26:39 And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.”

Matt. 26:40 And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, “So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour?”

Matt. 26:41 “Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

- From that point, Jesus goes a little farther by Himself and puts His face on the ground to pray alone
 - And Jesus prays that the Father would allow this moment to pass Him by
 - This is the only time in the Gospels when Jesus addresses God as “My Father” during a moment of prayer

- Which matches Jesus' mood...He's distressed like a child in trouble going to His Father for help
- Also, this is the only time in the Gospels where we see Jesus asking for something that the Father cannot give Him
 - But when you look more closely at Jesus' prayer, we see clearly that Jesus knew that the Father couldn't grant the request
 - In fact, Jesus was the Author of this plan
- The Bible says Jesus is the word of God, meaning He is the Author of the Bible, including the passages that foretell His crucifixion
 - For example, Jesus gave this word to Isaiah:

[Is. 53:4](#) Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
 And our sorrows He carried;
 Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
 Smitten of God, and afflicted.

[Is. 53:5](#) But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
 He was crushed for our iniquities;
 The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
 And by His scourging we are healed.

- Jesus told us about His death centuries before it happened including that it would involve a piercing and crushing
- And even before that, Jesus told us in the Torah that He would hang on a tree, referring to His crucifixion
- So how does Jesus expect the Father to give Him any other option now? Clearly Jesus didn't expect a "yes" to this request and His prayer reflects that
 - In fact, Jesus adds comments like "if possible" and "not my will but your will" to emphasize that He wants to do what the Father wants
 - And those additions are important, because without them we would find ourselves looking at a theological conundrum
 - If God the Son asks God the Father to do something then it would happen, for the Father and Son are always in agreement

- But the Father can't grant this request because it would contradict other Scripture, and God can't violate His word
- So we literally can't have a moment where the Son asks the Father to go against His word or it calls into question His deity
- Moreover, Jesus can't be against the Father's will or else Jesus ceases being a voluntary sacrifice for our sin, which is also against Scripture
 - The Bible says that Christ goes willingly to the cross for the sins of the World as an act of sacrificial love for Creation
 - And elsewhere Jesus says that the definition of love is that we lay our life down for another
 - So the voluntary nature of Jesus' death is critical to demonstrating the love of God
- So in His prayer, Jesus is careful to tell the Father that He should ignore Jesus' request if it goes against His will
 - Jesus asked for the trial to be taken away but only if that is what the Father willed
 - So in a sense, the Father gave Jesus exactly what Jesus requested
- From a human perspective, it's completely understandable why Jesus made this request even though it wasn't going to come to pass
 - This moment is one of the clearest examples of Jesus' humanity at work in Him and it's why this moment is recorded here
 - In fact, I would argue that if Jesus *hadn't* prayed this prayer, we would have reason to question whether Jesus was truly human
 - There's no way any human being could know what was coming and go into such a trial without wishing it would go away
- And as a model of prayer, this moment is perhaps the most important prayer moment in Jesus' earthly life
 - There is hardly a person alive who can't identify with Jesus here
 - How many times have we faced a circumstance where we want to pray for a different outcome
 - And yet we know that although God has the power to do anything, He is not likely to change things for us

- We ask God to save a loved one's life who is close to death and unlikely to recover...we know God can, but we sense He won't
- Or we ask God to reverse some situation in the world, something big like war or natural disasters...He could, but it's not likely He will
 - And even as you pray in situations like that, you may feel as if it's a waste of time
 - Or perhaps you question whether you are guilty of not having enough faith in God, etc.
- When you get to those moments, remember Jesus' prayer here and know your time in prayer was not a waste and you did nothing wrong
 - If Jesus can ask that His crucifixion stop, knowing there was no way God could say yes, then you are not wrong either
 - It's only human to bring requests to God, and we should, and even when we ask for things God won't do, there is value for us
- Prayer isn't merely a transaction with God...it's an opportunity to gain the mind of God so that we can persevere in His will
 - Jesus knew the plan...He *wrote* the plan...yet here He is asking God to change it if He willed to do so
 - Did God the Son want the plan to change? No, but the Son of Man certainly felt the stress of going through with it
 - And that caused Him to reach out to God just as we do seeking for some solution
 - And the solution God gave Jesus was the strength to go through with it, and that's why we pray in difficult times too: for strength
 - Sometimes we pray for things to change and they do because that's God's will, and we rejoice when His will and our will are aligned
 - And other times we will be praying for God to bring us that alignment, to strengthen us so we can accept what He brings
 - And in both cases, our prayer life becomes a witness to the world of the work of God and the will of God
 - And I believe that's what Jesus meant when He told the three disciples to watch...He meant they should watch Him in prayer to learn God's will

- These men were the witnesses to this prayer moment
 - By watching Jesus in prayer, they were in a position to record what Jesus said and report it to us
 - They could see Jesus' anguish in facing crucifixion, yet they also hear Jesus praying for the Father's will to be done in the end
- So that then as they reflected on this moment later in life, they could write things like this to the church:

[1Pet. 2:20](#) For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.

[1Pet. 2:21](#) For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps,

[1Pet. 2:22](#) WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH;

[1Pet. 2:23](#) and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously;

[1Pet. 2:24](#) and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.

- Peter says that Jesus kept entrusting Himself to the Father who judges righteously, and I think He was referring to this moment among others
 - Peter was thinking back to the Garden prayer where Jesus entrusted Himself to the Father's will in the midst of trial
 - And Peter says there's your example, there's your model for how to endure suffering...thank the Lord that He made Peter watch
- So what else did Jesus pray on that occasion? Well, we don't know because of what happens next...
 - In v.40 we're told Jesus gets just one sentence into His prayer when He notices that the men have fallen asleep
 - So Jesus gets up, goes to the men and wakes them and chastises them for not staying awake to watch even one hour
 - One hour is probably Jesus' approximation of the time remaining before Judas appears
 - Then Jesus says that they should pray as well to avoid temptation

- Some think Jesus meant the temptation to deny Christ or run away, which we know these men will eventually do
- That may be true, but I think Jesus was speaking of the temptation to sleep, since that's His primary concern now
- If they sleep they will not watch His prayer
- So with His disciples awake again for the moment, Jesus returns to prayer and repeats His request in a new way

Matt. 26:42 He went away again a second time and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done."

- Jesus says again that if the cup can't pass away, then the Father's will should be done
- Jesus is using the metaphor of drinking a cup as a picture of receiving the wrath of God
- The Bible describes the wrath of God being filled up in a cup and poured out on those deserving of it in the book of Revelation
 - And Jesus is using that same imagery here, except that the wrath of God is about to be poured out on Jesus
 - He is going to receive the wrath that God had reserved for all those who come to faith in Jesus
 - So the wrath that you and I deserved for our sin is being redirected to Jesus
 - And that's the "cup" Jesus doesn't want to drink yet knows He must
- So while Jesus' humanity is desperately seeking a way out, His divine nature remains intent on being One with the will of the Father
 - And in a sense we face a similar struggle in our walk with Jesus
 - Like Jesus, we have a spirit inside us that knows the right thing to do and wants to do God's will if it can
 - But standing in the way of our obedient spirit is our sinful flesh that always wants to do the opposite of God's will, Romans says

- And these two sides of us battle against one another constantly for control, and in a sense Jesus shows us that battle here
 - Of course, Jesus didn't possess sinful flesh, because He was not born of Adam and did not have sin in Him whatsoever
 - But in a similar way, Jesus is battling against the desire of His fleshly body in its desire to stay alive and avoid pain
- Those desires weren't sinful in and of themselves, yet if Jesus had given in to His body's weakness, then it would have become sin
 - So that's the struggle Jesus is waging here for our sake, as He's tempted to avoid the cross
 - Jesus endured that temptation and ignored His flesh's desire to avoid the cross so that He could do the Father's will
- Look, if Jesus had to experience this struggle to do the right thing, then we know He understands our battles and He's prepared to help us
 - As the writer of Hebrews tells us

[Heb. 4:15](#) For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.

[Heb. 4:16](#) Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

- Jesus can be our source of strength in times when we know what we need to do but can't find the strength to do it
- But our obligation in those moments is to do what Jesus is doing here...turn our struggles into prayer
- We ask the Father to either remove the trial or help us remain in His will in the trial, and He will hear us and give us one or the other
 - I think that may have been the lesson John learned as he watched Jesus in between moments of sleep on that night

[1John 5:13](#) These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

[1John 5:14](#) This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.

[1John 5:15](#) And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.

- John says that when we pray we know the Father hears us, and that He is answering our requests
- John doesn't say He will do what we want, but John does say we can be sure we are getting an answer in every case
- That's what we're watching Jesus model in this moment, no thanks to these three men who can barely keep their eyes open
 - For a third time they drift off, which forces Jesus to interrupt his prayer once more

[Matt. 26:43](#) Again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy.

[Matt. 26:44](#) And He left them again, and went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more.

[Matt. 26:45](#) Then He came to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners.

[Matt. 26:46](#) "Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!"

- This scene repeats a third time with Jesus commanding them to remain awake and then praying again and then returning to find them asleep
 - As a result, the Gospels don't record anything else besides Jesus' request to avoid the cross if it's the Father's will
 - If Jesus did say more, these men slept through most of it, but at least they got the main point
- Jesus' persistence in pressing His disciples to fight sleep offers us an important footnote to the model Jesus gives us here
 - We find two important ingredients for a godly prayer life, beginning with persistence
 - And not just the persistence to pray regularly, but persistence in the fight against the weakness of our flesh seeking to stop us
- How many of us can identify with this situation: we start praying and almost immediately we feel sleepy and can't keep going?

- Or you find your mind wandering away in the moment and you lose focus on what you're praying about?
- Or you are tempted to stop praying when your mind turns to something you've forgotten to do, etc.?
- All of these examples are your flesh tempting you to cease in prayer, which is a challenge in everyone's prayer life
 - We are tempted to fall asleep, to avoid the opportunity, to leave early, to give up altogether
 - Jesus reminds us here that our flesh is weak in everything, including in engaging in prayer
 - So persistence is an essential ingredient to a godly prayer life and knowing our flesh is weak requires strategies to address it
 - For example, if you get sleepy, then make your habit to pray in the morning or while you are taking a walk when you can stay alert
 - If you find your mind wandering, then make a list before you start to pray and focus on each item as you pray
 - If you are easily distracted by other demands in your life, then block your prayer time on a calendar, turn off the phone, etc.
 - If you ever face a trial like the one Jesus is facing, you won't have to worry about sleep or distraction, because you will be desperate to talk to the Father
 - But in your normal day-to-day prayer life, you may need some of these strategies to address the weakness of your flesh
 - And Jesus shows us that persistence is important...sleeping on the job is not OK when prayer is the order of the day
- Finally, Jesus asked these men to watch Him pray because He knew His public, vocal prayer would be an encouragement to them and to us
 - And in that detail, we learn that our public prayer is a powerful witness to others, believers and unbelievers alike
 - We don't pray in public to be noticed, of course, because that's just pride, but that wasn't Jesus' heart here
 - He wanted His disciples to watch Him because He was teaching them even as He was speaking to the Father

- And that should be our heart as well...praying publicly with other believers in church or a small group or some other setting is good
 - It's good for us and for those around us because it can be used by God to teach everyone
 - It will teach you to be a more public witness for Christ and to be more comfortable in sharing what you believe about Jesus
- And it will teach others the importance of prayer as they see your heart of prayer in that moment and as they witness God's response in time
 - Prayer is primarily a private experience done in secret, as Jesus tells us, but there are times when we share it with others too
 - Just as Jesus kept eight of His disciples back but allowed three close men to come with Him to hear His prayer
 - Look for opportunity to bring others along with you in your prayer life so that you can model for them and encourage them
- Our passage ended today with Jesus announcing His betrayer was approaching, and we will pick up our study here again with Judas' arrival