

PALM SUNDAY
“From Devotion to Denial” – The Cup of Weakness
Sermon – April 14, 2019

This week is what we call Holy Week. It is the week when Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey while people waved palm branches saying, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.” And yet in a few short days this outward devotion of the people would turn into a personal betrayal, a sorrowful denial and a cruel death.

After His triumphant entry into Jerusalem, Judas, one of the disciples of Jesus, goes to the religious authorities whom he knows feel threatened by Jesus and offers to betray Him for a small price. The authorities agree and make a contract with Judas to betray Jesus. Later, during Passover, Jesus initiates the Lord’s Supper which symbolizes the New Covenant He is making with those who believe in Him. Then, fully aware of the implications, Jesus tells Judas to go and do what he has to do. He then takes his remaining disciples with Him to the Garden of Gethsemane.

It is here in the garden that the betrayal of Jesus is manifested. Judas arrives with the soldiers of the high priest and greets Jesus with a kiss which initiates the arrest of Jesus. Suddenly aware of what is happening and always impulsive, Peter strikes out with His sword to prevent Jesus’ arrest and cuts off the ear of the high priest’s slave. Jesus then rebukes him and restores the man’s ear. Most of the disciples flee the scene but Peter and John follow the soldiers as they lead Jesus to the court of the high priest. While gaining entrance to the court Peter is asked if he is one of the disciples of Jesus. Afraid for his life Peter denies that he knows Christ three times before the cock crows, just as Jesus foretold he would.

Both Judas and Peter have denied Christ and are both filled with shame at what they have done. But the reaction of each is very different. Judas returns the money he was paid to the temple and then goes out and hangs himself, realizing he has betrayed an innocent man. Peter, on the other hand, weeps bitterly. He knew Jesus was the Messiah and has even proclaimed Him such. But He had just denied his own words.

Too ashamed of what he had done, Peter flees the court of the priest and leaves John behind. John is the only disciple who remains with Jesus through the trial, the flogging, and the crucifixion, standing with the mother of Jesus and the other women at the foot of the cross as Jesus breathes his last, is taken down from the cross and buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. To Peter’s credit, however, he does rejoin the other disciples. They gather together to comfort one another over the death of Jesus; but also to hide from the authorities behind closed doors because of their fear of the Jews.

It’s been quite a week. It started with the living Lord making a triumphant entry into Jerusalem but ended with a crucified Lord being buried in a tomb. If any of us had had such a week would we have responded any differently? Would we be less surprised or less confused? Would we have stayed close to Jesus or run away as they did for fear of being the next to die? How would our hearts respond to the death of someone so close to us who held such promise in our eyes? How would we respond to the fear of being the next to die?

Perhaps we’ll never know the answer to these questions until we ourselves are confronted with such fear and intimidation. But there are believers in other countries today who are going through this same fear of being a follower of Jesus. They know what it is like to be afraid for their lives because they have loved and followed the teaching of Jesus. Some have been beaten and died like their Savior. Others

have been imprisoned and tortured like other followers of Christ. They know what awaits them when they stand up publicly for Jesus and yet they remain steadfast in the faith, in spite of the impending consequences. They choose to follow the example of Jesus when He faced the suffering that lay ahead for Him simply because He chose to do the Father's will. It is this aspect of Holy Week that I want to look at today. Let's take a closer look at what happened to Jesus in the garden.

MATTHEW 26:36-46

“Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, ‘Sit here while I go over here and pray.’ And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee (James and John), and began to be grieved and distressed. Then He said to them, ‘My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me.’

“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.’ 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? Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.’

“He went away again, a second time and prayed, saying, ‘My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done.’ Again He came and found them sleeping. For their eyes were heavy. And He left them a third time, saying the same thing once more. 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.’”

What we see here is that Jesus is praying three times for some type of cup to pass from Him. Though He is willing to do the Father's will He is still deeply troubled about what is about to happen to Him. So there are three things we need to ask ourselves.

- (1) Was the prayer of Jesus granted or denied?
- (2) What was the “cup” Jesus was referring to?
- (3) Did this “cup” pass or not?

In order to determine if the prayer of Jesus was granted or not we first need to look at the conditions Jesus put on His request. Jesus said, “If it is possible, or “If You are willing.” It's an attempt to align the will of man with the will of God. It's like saying to a judge, “If it please the court” or “if it's alright with you”, or “If you're so inclined”, or “if you have no objection.” It's getting you and the court on the same page. Jesus is familiar with these types of condition statements.

In Mark chapter 9 Jesus encounters a man whose son had a demon which the disciples had been unable to cast out. In desperation he cries out to Jesus and says, “‘Lord, if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!’ And Jesus said to him, ‘All things are possible to him who believes’” (Mark 9:11-23). And again in Matthew chapter 8, Jesus is confronted by a leper who bowed down before Him and said, “‘Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.’ Jesus stretched out His hand and touched Him, saying, ‘I am willing; be cleansed.’ And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.’” (Matthew 8:1-3).

I believe Jesus had the same confidence in asking the Father for something that these same people in despair were asking of Him. He understood the compassion of the Father and responded in like kind to those who were desperate for His touch. After all, Jesus did say, “...the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me.”(John 12:50b). So Jesus was familiar with the response of the Father to the requests

of the needy. Thou He said, “If it be Your will” Jesus had every reason to hope for a positive answer to his request. And what was His request? *“Let this cup pass from Me.”*

So what is the cup Jesus is referring to? In the Old Testament the use of the word “cup” stood for our lives, which can be filled with a variety of things. There was a CUP OF BLESSING like that found in the Twenty-Third Psalm: *“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”* (Psalm 23:5-6).

There is also the CUP OF SALVATION found in Psalm 116 where it says, *“I shall lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord”* (Psalm 116:13), and the CUP OF GOD’S WRATH and the CUP OF STAGGERING which are found in Isaiah 51: *“Wake yourself, stand O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of His wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl, the cup of staggering”* (Isaiah 51:17).

Since the cup of blessing or salvation is not something which Christ would have asked to “pass” from Him, the “cup” which Jesus did not want to drink from must have been the cup of God’s wrath. Since we know that the wrath of God was poured out on Jesus in our stead this makes the most sense. But we still have to ask ourselves, did God answer the pray of Jesus? Did the “cup” of God’s wrath pass from Him? The answer is an unequivocal “NO”. Jesus knows and understands that He is the Lamb upon which the wrath of God must fall in order for God’s plan of salvation to be complete. We read in Isaiah:

ISAIAH 53:5

“Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced though 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. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each have turned to his own way; But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.”

The reason I believe the cup of God’s wrath did not pass from Him is because it would have manifested itself in several obvious yet different ways. It would have been seen through the experience of:

HIS SUFFERING
HIS SEPARATION
THE CROSS
HIS DEATH

This may seem obvious, but let’s go through each one and ask ourselves again if these particular portions of the cup of God’s wrath passed from Jesus. “Did the “cup” of suffering pass from Him? NO. Peter tells us, *“Christ also suffered when He died for our sins once for all time. ...He suffered physical death, but He was raised to life in the Spirit”* (1 Peter 3:18). Did the “cup” of separation pass from Him? NO. Mark tells us, *“At the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ...”My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”*(Mark 15:34), proving that a separation occurred when God’s wrath was poured out on Jesus. Let’s move now to the other portions of the cup of God’s wrath.

Did the “cup” of the cross pass from Him? NO. Luke tells us, *“This (Jesus), delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death”* (Acts 2:23). Did the “cup” of death pass from Him? NO. Paul says, *“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,*

and that He was buried. (1 Corinthians 15:3-4a).

To drink the cup of God's wrath is the whole reason Jesus came. But this leaves us with a dilemma. Since Jesus asked for a cup to be removed and none of the "cups" we have already mentioned have passed from Him we are left with only two possible scenarios: (1) either His prayer was not answered or (2) we have identified the wrong "cup".

Let's start with the first by asking ourselves if there was any prayer of Jesus in all of Scripture that was not answered; I do not believe so for the following reasons. John tells us, *"Whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight."* (1 John 3:21). Since Jesus said, *"I always do the things that are pleasing to Him"* (John 8:29), it stands to reason that God would always answer the prayers of Jesus who did nothing to displease Him.

This brings us full circle. If every prayer that Jesus prayed was answered, and if the cup Jesus asked to "pass" from Him was not the cup of wrath, nor was it deliverance from suffering or separation, deliverance from the cross nor deliverance from death, then in order for that cup to be "passed" from Him and His prayer answered He must be referring to some other "cup" that was passed. But what is that cup? I believe it is THE CUP OF FLESHLY WEAKNESS. Here is why. When Jesus struggled in the garden He said, *"My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death."* He also chided the sleeping disciples by saying, *"Keep watching and praying that you may not come into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."*

It would appear that Jesus was concerned about the battle that His flesh was raging against His spirit. He kept watch and prayed three times so that He would not succumb to the physical and emotional terrors facing him. At one point Jesus was in such agony over the possibility that His will and flesh would fail Him as He went through the suffering required of Him that Scripture says, *"His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground"* (Luke 22:44). Though He was God, He was God in the flesh. And He knew His flesh could not endure without the power of God sustaining Him.

Jesus left heaven for a purpose. And He knew the fulfillment of that purpose meant dying on a cross. This fact was never in dispute. And despite His troubled soul, He expressed no desire to shy away from fulfilling His purpose. In fact He said, *"Now my soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name"* (John 12:27). It was not His purpose that He was concerned about but rather His physical ability to endure everything that He would have to suffer in order to fulfill that purpose. He knew what awaited Him when He left the garden. He would be beaten, He would be sentenced to death, and He would be nailed to a cross, the cruelest punishment reserved for common criminals in His day.

The cross itself could weigh well over 300 pounds; the crossbeam alone around 100 pounds. Jesus would have to carry this weight after being beaten and whipped until He was unrecognizable. The Scripture says, *"They took Jesus...and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called... Golgotha"* (John 19:17). The cross was so heavy that Jesus collapsed under the weight of it so the soldiers made a passerby named Simon carry it the rest of the way up the hill to Golgotha (Luke 23:26)..

In the garden, Jesus began to feel the effects of His mission. This was compounded with the knowledge of what lay before Him. And He foresaw that His strength could literally fail before He would make it all the way to Golgotha. So His garden prayer was not the vacillating prayer of a weak and cowardly man who was trying to avoid death. Quite the contrary, He was praying for the physical and mental strength necessary to endure the cross! And His prayer was answered.

According to Tim Hale, “In Gethsemane, Jesus prayed for the Father to help Him *get through* His cup of agony, His battle against temptation, the weakness of His flesh against the will of His spirit. And that is precisely what the Father helped Him do. The prayer was answered, the cup of weakness passed away.”

I believe this is an accurate description of what Jesus was asking, and here is why. Before Jesus went away to pray He told His disciples, “*My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death.*” He clearly was in physical and mental agony at this point in time. However, during the prayer Luke tells us that “*an angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him.*” And after the prayer Jesus tells His disciples, “*Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand.*” It appears that something happened between the initial agonizing prayer and His determined stance after prayer to face what lie ahead of Him.

It was clear that in order for God’s plan to be completed Jesus would have to bear God’s judgment, a judgment which rightly belongs to all who have sinned. In this judgment, He will suffer horribly, both in the physical realm and in the spiritual realm as the wrath the Father causes Him to turn away from His only Begotten Son; and the separation which sinful man has endured for centuries becomes a reality for Jesus.

The body of flesh He chose to inhabit is crying out against the terrors awaiting Him. The temptation of His flesh to bypass this path of pain is great. Jesus seeks His Father’s help to resist and to remain on course. Since we know the end of the story, how did Jesus get from asking to have “this cup” pass from Him to actually drinking the cup of God’s wrath through suffering and death on the cross? He did it the same way all of us may do it, through submission; which is why He said, “*Not as I will, but as You will.*”

Jesus had determined He would submit to the Father’s will and drink the cup His Father had given Him to drink (John 18:1-11). What happened between His agonizing prayer where His sweat became like drops of blood and His actual betrayal and arrest? “*an angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him*”(Luke 22:43). God answered His prayer by sending an angel to strengthen Him in preparation for what lie ahead. And with this answer came a change of perspective on His ability to endure.

Hebrews tells us that “*(Jesus),...for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and ...sat down at the right hand of the throne of God*” (Hebrews 12:2b). Jesus was looking past the immediate to the ultimate. He was letting the joy of the coming reward keep Him centered on the task before Him so that He would not stumble but rather fulfill what God had asked and He had volunteered to do.

There have been many who have gone before us who have had to endure suffering because of the firm belief in God and His word. Hebrews tells us that some have been tortured, mocked and scourged, put in chains and imprisoned; some were stoned, some were sawn in two, some were put to death with the sword; others were destitute, afflicted and ill-treated, wandering in the deserts, mountains, caves, and holes in the ground because they had no place to call home. Each and every one of these gained approval through their faith and understood the difficulty in staying the course despite the cost to their lives. They finished the race well and were welcomed into eternity because they did not love their lives more than their Savior even when faced with death. The author of Hebrews reminds us of their sacrifice and their struggle against the flesh.

HEBREWS 12:1-3, 13

“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of faith, who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

“For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin...Therefore strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet.”

Jesus told His disciples, *‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me’*” (Luke 9:23). Jesus knew what must be done in order to successfully navigate this life. That’s why He asked for the strength to endure the suffering and shame that was facing Him at the cross. He was willing to endure the hostility of sinners against Himself because He set His sights on what He knew awaited Him after the pain and suffering of the cross.

There was a joy set before Him which was far greater than the pain in front of Him even at that moment when He was sweating drops of blood in the garden. That joy was not simply to sit at the right hand of the Father. The joy set before Him was also you and me. For without His enduring the shame of the cross there would be no opportunity for us to be in heaven with Him. We are the joy that was set before Him. The fellowship of God with man celebrated with Him in His kingdom is a joy that caused Jesus to willingly lay down His life for us.

Jesus said there is a reward in Heaven for all those who endure to the end. Endure what? Whatever stands before us. Like Jesus we will have things that frighten us, that concern us, and that overwhelm us nearly to death. If we are to successfully triumph over them we must do what Jesus did and take our fears and hurts and disappointments and uncertainty to the Father, telling Him what we are most concerned about and asking for His help to endure whatever suffering lies ahead.

All of us know what our breaking point is and we all try to avoid getting to that point. But what we do when those days overwhelm us is what will determine the success or failure of our faith. Life can be hard and resisting temptation is a constant battle. Though we are forgiven we struggle against sin every day. Each day we must choose whom we will serve.

Paul says *“The flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.”* The Spirit of God lives within this immortal body of flesh and it strives with us in our battle to not do the things which our flesh desires us to do. To reject the desires of the flesh is to humble ourselves, deny our desires, choose obedience over temptation, and allow the Spirit of God within us to win the battle.

All of us here have some kind of story of overcoming temptation. Some of us have had instant victories; others have had long bouts of weakness followed by renewed strength. I sometimes struggle with the simplest things and yet there are times when I find myself constantly battling the stronger urges of my flesh. Each time the flesh wants to rise up I have to make a choice on who I will serve that day. Will I allow my flesh to rule and serve myself, or will I resist the flesh and serve God. Will I choose Jesus over desire?

As you know, Wendy and I have been involved with a few homeless people who have struggled

with addictions over the years. Some have been enslaved to drugs, others to alcohol. These addictions were the go to place to avoid the pain and trauma in their life. Some were abandoned or abused by their parents. Some witnessed the killing of their sibling. Some were betrayed in their marriage and their kids were taken away from them. Others became widows because of senseless tragedies.

But what I have seen recently is that through continued and persistent prayer these women have renewed their commitment to the Lord and have begun the process of living a full life. Like all of us, I'm sure they would have preferred for the cup of suffering and hardship to pass from them. They would have preferred to overcome their temptations a long time ago and avoid all the adversity which came their way. For they have indeed suffered the full consequences of the choices they made, even to the loss of everything they held dear.

God, however, is in the process of restoring what they have lost. These women now have homes to live in, jobs to work at, money to spend, and family relationships restored. They have strived against their sin and have come out on the other end. These women should be seen as a testimony to all of us for they have suffered much and yet God has loved them out of and in spite of their self-imposed suffering.

Most of us have never suffered as much as these women have or as much as Jesus did. And yet what they have in common is that there was a joy set before them that has allowed them to overcome their addictions, to say no to temptations and stay clean and sober for nearly a year. Our struggle against sin most likely pales in comparison to theirs and yet we probably complain much more loudly about it and have far less victory over it than these women have.

Paul tells us to set our minds on the things above, not on the things that are on the earth (Colossians 3:2-3); to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith who, for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God; and to consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that we will not grow weary and lose heart. Paul also reminds us that a little reality check is necessary from time to time for unlike Jesus, we have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in our striving against sin" (Hebrews 12:3-4). Our struggle may seem monumental but when compared to the joy that awaits us in heaven they are, as Paul says, momentary light afflictions which are producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.

Like Jesus, we must be diligent to finish the race that has been set before us so that we may inherit the place He has prepared for us. We do this by humbling ourselves under the mighty hand of God (1 Peter 5:6) and overcoming the temptations of the flesh by loving the Lord more than ourselves, pleasing Him rather than pleasing ourselves. Even for the weakest among us this is possible because we seek the strength of the Father to help us get through the difficulties in life. We can't do it on our own but, like Jesus, we can do it with His help. This is His promise to us.

*"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."
(Philippians 4:13)*

HIS STRENGTH IS PERFECT

I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength
But sometimes I wonder what He can do through me.
No great success to show, no glory of my own,
Yet in my weakness He is there to let me know....
His strength is perfect when our strength is gone

He'll carry us when we can't carry on
Raised in His power the weak become strong
His strength is perfect. His strength is perfect

We can only know the power that He holds
When we truly see how deep our weakness goes
His strength in us begins when ours comes to an end
He hears our humble cry and proves again....

His strength is perfect when our strength is gone
He'll carry us when we can't carry on
Raised in His power the weak become strong
His strength is perfect. His strength is perfect

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