

Gethsemane
Matthew 26:36-46

One of the great struggles of the early church was to articulate and define the doctrine of the two natures of Jesus—his human nature and his divine nature. The early councils succeeded in that effort, and the creed formulated by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 has never been improved upon. It has no need of correction. Jesus was declared to be “complete in Godhead and complete in manhood.” In other words, fully God and fully man.

The definition of that doctrine was difficult to formulate because there is no single Bible verse that is sufficient to provide such a definition. Not even a couple of verse are sufficient. The two equal natures of Jesus is certainly a biblical doctrine, proven by Scripture, but a rather large combination of verses are needed in order to rightly and fully articulate all that ought to be said about Jesus’ human and and divine natures as well as to define the relationship between them. Many of those verses are examples of demonstrations of one or the other of those natures.

Our text this afternoon contributes to that understanding in a very important way, because what we see of Jesus in his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane is the expression of his humanity, his human nature, in his own words and actions. There is no doctrinal statement here, per se, but rather we see a man in prayer. But not just any man, the son of man, the second person of the Trinity himself. We see Jesus, in his humanity, coming to terms with that which lay ahead of him regarding his suffering and death. He remains God, fully aware of that “the hour is at hand” for his suffering and death. But in that context,

I. JESUS EXPRESSES HIS HUMAN HEART IN PRAYER.

v.36 “Then Jesus came with them to a place called

Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, “Sit here while I go and pray over there.”

That wasn’t an unusual occurrence, as we read,

John 18:1 “When Jesus had spoken these words, He went out with His disciples over the Brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which He and His disciples entered. 2 And Judas, who betrayed Him, also knew the place; for Jesus often met there with His disciples.”

Matthew tells us that he took with him the three disciples closest to him throughout his ministry,

v. 37 “And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee.”

James and John, with Peter, join Jesus, and so we see a man in prayer. And we learn much about prayer. We learn much about godliness and submission. We learn much about the fervency with which we ought to pray, and the sense of communion with our heavenly father that is the very substance of prayer. We observe that prayer is not just a list of requests. It is not some sort of cathartic expression that gives us release to our emotions. It is not just a formula, nor anything that might be described as “just going through the motions.” For Jesus, prayer is nothing less than laying out the thoughts and desires of his heart in the presence of his father in heaven. It is deeply personal, and I might add, deeply human. It is a demonstration of his human nature. So what do we see?

Notice what Matthew tells us, for he reveals to us the human experience of Jesus. His full humanity is on full display. The end of,

v.37 “...and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed.”

Strong words are used. The sorrow is the sorrow of grief. The sadness of loss, specifically the loss of life. He was conscious of his own impending death. And he was deeply distressed. Literally “full of loathing.” The fullness of anguish was his. He was completely weighed down by the heaviness of the burden that was upon him. Again, the expression of his human heart. This was,

A. The sorrow of human grief.

He expresses that clearly,
v.38

Overcome by so much sorrow that he himself might be close to death! So great, so intense, so painful was his own experience of human suffering. And thus he prayed!

I should note that prayer isn’t a substitute for such suffering, it doesn’t eliminate it. It doesn’t remove the sense of grief, and, in fact, our own suffering in the midst of our own prayer is no different. Prayer wasn’t the means by which his grief would be ended or relieved, but rather it was the expression of that grief as he prayed to his father in heaven. His prayer was the opportunity to express his grief, not at this point, to remove it!

Scripture is clear about the nature of that grief for Jesus, and it’s intensity, as we read of it in many other places, such as,

Is. 53:3 “He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. 4 Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has

laid on Him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth. 8 He was taken from prison and from judgment, And who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; For the transgressions of My people He was stricken. 9 And they made His grave with the wicked— But with the rich at His death, Because He had done no violence, Nor was any deceit in His mouth. 10 Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief.”

That’s what Jesus would experience on the cross, and that anticipation of that grief was expressed here in Gethsemane. No greater suffering could be imagined, as Jesus recognized that he was not simply “despised and rejected by men,” but that he was “smitten by God, and afflicted.” The Lord, his father in heaven, would lay upon him “the iniquity of us all.” Thus he would cry out upon the cross those awful words of,

Ps. 22:1 “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, And from the words of My groaning? 2 O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear; And in the night season, and am not silent.”

And that point, Jesus’ grief is greater than any grief you or I will ever have, as Christians. For Jesus was forsaken, condemned, for our sin. And because he endured that condemnation, the promise of the gospel is that there is, for us in Christ, no condemnation.

But the point here in Matthew 26 is the depth of the sorrow of his human grief, suffering as a man for our sins. And even further, we see his agony. Again, it is,

B. The agony of human suffering.

The agony is expressed by those almost unbelievable words of Jesus,

v.39 “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.”

Those words provide an astounding insight into the two natures of Christ, here, of course, his human nature. He didn’t cease being God. He didn’t give up anything related to his divine nature. And in his human nature, he didn’t sin. But he did experience and express an agony that is greater than any of us could ever possibly bear ourselves. He knew the hour was at hand. He knew that it was his father’s will for him to suffer and to die. He knew the purpose of his incarnation, to lay down his life for his sheep. But all of that didn’t eliminate the agony of his human suffering. And so he prays for the desire of his human heart,

v.39 “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me.”

He repeats the request two more times,

v.42

v.44

There is the full demonstration of a man facing human death. There is the agony of a man at its absolute maximum point. He was fully man, “complete in manhood” as the Chalcedon Creed put it. Real, actual, experiential agony, so much so that he would ask these words of his father, “if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me.”

Luke’s gospel adds a little more detail regarding the extent of that agony for our benefit. It was so great that an angel was sent for his strengthening and encouragement.

Luke 22:43 “Then an angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him. 44 And being in agony, He prayed more

earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.”

That expression of humanity, of course, includes another aspect Jesus’ humanity, namely,

C. The willing trust of submission.

The prayer is not simply, “let this cup pass from Me.” He doesn’t simply ask for his father to bring and end his suffering. He prays, “If it is possible.” There is the submission, the trust of submission as I put it. I think that is a helpful way to express it, for it is not a bare submission. It is not a fatalistic nor a reluctant submission. There is no sense of despair or hopelessness. Just the human willingness to trust his Father, and in that trust, to submit to his father’s will. So he prays, the end of verse 39, “nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.”

Here is where we learn much about Jesus’ full humanity, in his submission to his father’s will. Remember, he remains the eternal son of God, the second person of the Trinity. At other times he rightfully claims an equality with God.

John 1:18 “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.”

John 10:30 “I and My Father are one.”

Further, Jesus understood his divine purpose.

John 4:34 “Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work.”

But still, in complete harmony with that awareness of his relationship to his father in heaven, with full consistency with his divine nature as the second person of the Trinity, still, in his humanity, in his role as the mediator and advocate for all other men born of Adam, he submits to his father in the fullness of the

willing trust of a perfect, sinless human being. “Nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.”

Fully divine, fully God. And fully, completely man. That’s Jesus. Then we see his disciples.
v.40-41

They fell asleep. Jesus was praying with all the intensity and agony I have just sought to explain, and they fell asleep. So,

II. JESUS EXPOSES THE HUMAN HEART OF HIS DISCIPLES.

And he rebukes them for,

A. A careless laziness.

I thought about the best way to describe his disciples, and that’s what I came up with. A careless laziness. “Could you not watch with Me one hour?” Laziness so often afflicts the human heart, doesn’t it? Spiritual laziness. Especially in prayer, which remains for us such a frequent opportunity to resist laziness. It’s hard to pray, and lest we are too quick to condemn these disciples, I suspect many of you, maybe most, would know the experience of falling asleep when you pray.

For the disciples, of course, it is magnified, because Jesus is with them. They know the time is at hand. He has just transformed the Old Covenant sign of circumcision into the Lord’s Supper. He has told them of his impending suffering and death, and so this laziness is extremely careless. Jesus expresses his rebuke with that interjection simply translated, “What!” The ESV has “So…” The word adds emphasis, emphasizing the human failure of these disciples who had been so close to Jesus throughout his ministry.

Jesus continues his rebuke, his warning, with regard to,

B. A dangerous vulnerability.

Jesus wasn’t simply frustrated with them because of their carelessness regarding himself. It wasn’t about him at this point. He was so very conscious of the danger they were bringing upon themselves.

v.41 “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation.”

Their laziness left them vulnerable to temptation. Their carelessness left them vulnerable to the attraction of sin. And those words are so penetrating, as we hear them not only spoken to Peter, James and John, but also to us! “Watch and pray!” “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation.”

None of us can hear those words without realizing just how appropriate they are for ourselves. 41 “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation.” We look at these three beloved disciples and realize we are just as vulnerable as they are!

Jesus had warned his disciples with these words before.

Mark 13:32 “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33 Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is. 34 It is like a man going to a far country, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to each his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to watch. 35 Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming—in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning— 36 lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. 37 And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!”

This is a dominant theme in the whole realm of biblical ethics, how we should live.

Luke 21:36 “Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

1 Thes. 5:4 “But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. 5 You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. 6 Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. 7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. 8 But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation.”

Peter also,

1 Peter 4:7 “But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers.”

This dangerous vulnerability is common to man, and Jesus makes clear,

C. A natural weakness.

v.41 “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

The flesh there is not simply a reference to our physical bodies, but to the whole of our person as it would be governed and controlled by nature, rather than by the spirit. So the contrast between the flesh and the spirit is the contrast between what the Bible calls the natural man and the man controlled by the spirit. The natural man, humanity without reference to God, human nature as inherited from Adam, has a fallen nature, a sinful nature. And even for Christians, the remnants of that old man remain, waging war with our spirit! Paul puts it this way, expressing that natural weakness of that old man with these

striking words,

Rom. 7:14 “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. 15 For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do...18 For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find...21 I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. 22 For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. 23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. 24 O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.”

Because of the reality of those words, we need to hear Jesus warning along with Peter, James and John, for we have the same natural weakness.

v.41 “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Finally, then, we see that,

III. JESUS ACTS WITH A RESOLUTE COMMITMENT.

The failure of his disciples notwithstanding, Jesus teaches them and tells them exactly what is taking place. He has finished his prayer. His expressions of human grief and agony are completed. Now he declares,

A. The awareness of God’s timing.

v.45 “Then He came to His disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand.”

The reference to “the hour” is a frequent and repeated reference to time in God’s perfect plan and providence when Jesus would complete his work on earth and be put to death. “The hour” is a repeated acknowledgement that all of this, everything, is appointed by God to take place according to his own personal decree and purpose, his eternal purpose, his predestined purpose. God had determined the fullness of time for Jesus to die, and that time has now arrived. The time of Jesus’ birth gets that same identification,

Gal. 4:4 “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.”

That time has now come. And nothing happens apart from God’s own sovereign determination in that regard. The hour is at hand for everything to come to pass, just as God had determined, just as Jesus had previously explained as well!

Mat. 20:17 “Now Jesus, going up to Jerusalem, took the twelve disciples aside on the road and said to them, 18 “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, 19 and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again.”

Thus this hour that arrived for Jesus included,

B. The awareness of his betrayal.

v.45b “Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46 Rise, let us be going. See, My betrayer is at hand.”

That introduces our text next week,

v.47

For today, let me end with this emphasis of betrayal. Central to this whole idea of God’s plan and God’s timing is the reality that Jesus would be betrayed by a man, a man representing all others who would follow in that betrayal. It was the sin of man for which Jesus would die, and that sin is never more clearly demonstrated than in Judas’ betrayal. And it was that betrayal that earned for Judas the condemnation of God himself, for God’s wrath and judgment is always just. It is always deserved, and earned. The wages of sin is death.

So Jesus is resolute. Rather than hide for his own safety, rather than hide from his betrayer, rather than hide from the sorrow and agony of his Father’s justice that will soon come to him, he submits to it in the fullness of his human. “Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners.”

Is. 53: 5 “But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth.”