

LIFE OVEN WITH JESUS: Decisive Moments

We've been exploring various characteristics of the life of Jesus, asking how his life can shape and influence our lives. Now that we're closing in on the end of the series - on the calendar at least - we're going to experience a bit of a time warp.

The moments we've considered in the last three months or so have been useful and on-point on just about any Sunday.

- Last week we talked about his emotions - we experience emotions every day.
- Earlier in the series, our focus was on compassion for others - there's never a day compassion doesn't matter.
- At the beginning of the series we found Jesus in his youth at the temple, learning, asking questions - we called that "knowing his place," knowing that his place was in the house of God, and we said that we have a place there, too. Well, now matter the time of year, we have a place here, in this temple.

Today, however, we talk about a moment that has a spot on the calendar; it has a specific location in the story of Jesus' life, and truth be told, we're not at that place in the calendar yet. The moment occurs when Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night he was arrested, the night before he died on the cross. As we talk about Jesus in the garden, just know I know we're not there yet on the calendar. Easter's still two weeks away. But a powerful truth awaits us today, one necessary for any day and any location.

We've already hinted at a bit of the scene. Jesus has eaten what we call the Last Supper with his disciples. He knows that Judas intends to betray him, intends to lead the authorities to Jesus so they can arrest him. In that setting, he heads to the garden with his disciples. What transpires there, I contend, is the single most important moment of Jesus' life, it's the kind of moment we all face regularly and need to be prepared for.

Let's read the opening verses of the scene (MT 26.36-38).....

Jesus is stressed. Jesus is under pressure. Jesus is worried. He knows his life is in danger. He knows Judas is out there somewhere doing his betrayal thing. Jesus responds to his stress by praying, and listen carefully to the content of the first half of his prayer (v.39).... His prayer is God, take this cup from me. What's the cup? His situation, his peril, his stress, the threat on his life. Jesus' prayer is God I don't want to go through this. Take it away.

We can all identify with that prayer, can't we? We've all had moments, seasons of life, that we wanted to avoid. We've all faced tough decisions, anxiety producing choices about which, if we prayed, we prayed something like Jesus prayed: Take this cup, take this moment, take this stress, take this difficulty, take this challenge, take this anxiety, take this hard choice away from me. I don't want it.

Often those moments come when doing the right thing is hard, when there are much easier, less taxing options. God, take this moment from me. I know what I ought to do here - I need to apologize, I need to accept responsibility for my actions, I need to tell the cashier that he or she gave me too much change, I need to do something about my attitude, I need to make more time for my spiritual side, I need to be more generous, I need to change my priorities, I need to tell my friend the truth about his or her situation. But all of those are hard options, God, so take them from me! Make it is easier! Move me to a place in my life where the right thing isn't such a difficult thing. Take this cup from me! We've all faced moments like that.

It's as if it's in the DNA of doing the right thing. If it's the right thing, it's going to be a hard thing. Telling the truth can be hard. Reordering priorities can be hard. Giving up our selfish interests can be hard. Putting others first can be hard. Putting ourselves at risk of ridicule or embarrassment by doing the right thing when the right thing is not the popular thing or easy thing, can be really, really hard. Doing the right thing can be inconvenient, it can be humbling, it can delay or even cancel our vision of the life we had in mind. You know what I'm talking about if you've ever had to tell somebody a hard truth, or confess a mistake, or stand up for what you believe even though no one in the room agreed with you.

In the Garden, Jesus asks God to take away his stress. He doesn't like what's coming. He doesn't want to be the victim of Judas' dastardly act. He doesn't want to die! So he asks God to take the cup from him.

But there's more going on in the garden, because Jesus has the opportunity to run from his danger. After asking God to take the cup from him, Jesus goes back to his disciples and say, boys, stay here if you like, but I'm heading out.

It's the timing of the garden scene that makes it the most decisive moment in his life. The threat is great. The danger is imminent. His choice is literally a matter of life and death: If he runs, he might be able to hide from the threat; if he doesn't run, he'll die. That's what makes this the most decisive moment in his life.

- That most decisive moment is not his baptism - it's cool that the voice from heaven calls him God's beloved son, but coming out of the water, he's not in danger.
- The temptation scene is really important, but if Jesus gives in to the temptations of the devil, he'll still be alive.
- The sermon on the mount is a great moment, but it's a bunch of words.
- All the miracles Jesus performed? There's not much risk in making people's lives better.

But in the garden, there is a risk. His choice is to stay in the garden and face death, or run and perhaps stay alive. V.39 tells us the choice he made.....

Not my will, but your will. I don't want to be here. I want this cup to pass from me. If I had my way, I'd be in the caribbean on some cruise ship eating midnight seafood buffets, but what I want is not what matters. What matters is what you want. And when there's a conflict between what I want and what you want, I will choose - I will surrender to - what you want, God. Not because it's easy. Not because I like it. Not because it's my first choice - or my ANY choice! But because it's your choice, and you're God and I have decided to trust you - trust your judgment, trust your word, trust your will. So I put my life - my circumstances, my priorities, my choices - in your hands. And I will do your thing, the right thing, in this moment.

Ever since the 9/11 attacks, we've had a national reverence for so-called first responders, the police officers, fire fighters, EMS professionals who, in an image that has become popular, run toward danger, not away from it. The rest of us run away from risk. First responders run toward it. As followers of Jesus, we daily face a choice whether to run toward the will of God - however risky, challenging, or just plain hard that is - or to run away from it. Do we run toward the sacrifices of time, money, or personal pride because God is calling us toward them, or do we run away from them? When Jesus says pick up your cross and follow, do we move toward our cross - a cross of surrender, a cross of humility, a cross of personal holiness - or do we move away from it because crosses are heavy and we'd much rather carry something lighter?

We live in a self-serving age. What's in it for me? How do I benefit from it? Jesus in the garden had to decide whether how he would benefit was more important than what God wanted. He made his choice. This week you and I will face similar choices in the form of how we spend our time, what we choose as our priorities, how we treat the people around us, whether we do the right thing or the easy thing.

The garden scene in Jesus' life demonstrates that doing the right thing is not about doing what's easy. This week, don't expect otherwise. But also, when you do the right thing - when you walk toward your cross, not away from it - you will be blessed, and God will bring you to new life. It's a promise we can rely on because we know what's going to happen after Jesus moves toward his cross.