

Thy Will Be Done
Matthew 26:36-46
John Breon



The image of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane is depicted in many paintings. One of the most famous is this one, by a German artist named Heinrich Hofmann. A picture like this hung on the front wall of the church where I grew up. In a church we served previously, there was a large version of this scene that hung over the back door of the sanctuary.

When I was an associate pastor, the senior pastor devoted a sermon series to portraits of Jesus. This was before computers were common. It was a big deal to have slides made and to use a slide projector to show the images on a screen. He had slides of various paintings of Jesus and built his sermons around interpreting the paintings and the scriptures they portrayed. One Sunday, he had me do the sermon for this scene.

Let's back up a bit and get into the scene. Jesus and his disciples have shared the Passover meal together. One of the customs at Passover was to sing at the end of the meal. Matthew mentions that Jesus and the disciples sang "a hymn" (26:30). The Passover hymn was taken from Psalms 113-118. These are called the "hallel" psalms—"hallel" means "praise." These songs of praise were an important part of Israel's worship and came to be associated with Passover. This afternoon, or sometime this week, go back and read these psalms to get a feel for what was in Jesus' heart and on his lips as he went to the Garden of Gethsemane and then to the cross.

That section of the Psalms includes these words:

Let the name of the LORD be praised, both now and forevermore.
From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the LORD is to be praised. (113:2-3)

When Israel came out of Egypt, Jacob from a people of foreign tongue, Judah became God's sanctuary, Israel his dominion. (114:1-2)

What shall I return to the LORD for all his goodness to me?
I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.
(116:12-13)

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever! ...
When hard pressed, I cried to the LORD; he brought me into a spacious place. The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me? ... LORD, save us! LORD, grant us success! ...
You are my God, and I will praise you; you are my God, I will exalt you.
Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.
(118:1, 5-6, 25, 28-29)

These are the kinds of words ringing in the ears of Jesus and the disciples as they leave the upper room and go out of the city to the Mount of Olives and an olive grove called Gethsemane. As they go, Jesus tells his disciples that they will all fall away and desert him. He quotes the prophet Zechariah, whose words keep echoing throughout this last week of Jesus' life. Then Jesus gives a word of hope—though they'll all desert him, they'll be restored. Jesus will be raised and they will meet him again in Galilee.

Not really understanding Jesus, Peter starts making bold promises and trying to set himself apart from the others. "Even if they all desert you, I won't." But Jesus knows what Peter will go through and how he'll respond. "Truly, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." In just a little while, Jesus will pray three times, surrendering to God's will. Later, three times Peter will deny that he even knows Jesus. Later

still, some days after the resurrection, three times Jesus will ask Peter, "Do you love me?"

But now Peter keeps declaring, "Even if I have to die with you, I won't deny you." And they all said the same. What bold promises do we make, confident in our own ability to keep them? And what do we do when we find that we don't have what it takes to keep those promises? Jesus wants our commitment and our promise of loyalty. But he also wants us to rely on him to help us keep those commitments.

Now Jesus and the disciples arrive at the olive grove called Gethsemane (that name means "Olive Press"). They've come here before. It's a good place to camp and a good place to pray. He tells the disciples to wait while he prays. Then he takes Peter, James and John a little farther. These three were with Jesus when he raised to life a synagogue leader's daughter (Mt 9:18-26). They were with him on the mountain when he was transfigured and his glory shone (17:1-13).

Now Jesus begins to be sorrowful and troubled, distressed and agitated. He tells his friends, "I am overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

What do you do when the strong person in your life suddenly becomes weak? Children face this when a parent they've relied on for everything is suddenly struck down with illness or grief. Colleagues working on a project can be thrown into confusion if the team leader suddenly loses confidence. A church struggles if the pastor loses faith or hope or integrity.

The disciples must have felt something like that. Despite opposition, frustrations, and even anger, Jesus had always been the strong one. He was always ready with another story or a sharp one-liner that turned the tables on some questioner. He kept giving his disciples soaring visions of God and the kingdom. The disciples always had the problems and Jesus always had the answers. Now, here he is suffering, agonizing (N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*).

Jesus throws himself on the ground. He's struggling, he's in agony. Thinking about the pain, the anguish, the physical torture, and the emotional and spiritual suffering he'll endure in the next several hours, Jesus prays for another way. If it's possible, let all that of that not happen.

He cries out to God, using the intimate term "Father," or "Abba," as Mark tells us (15:36). He pleads, "Let this cup of suffering pass from me."

Can we let be Jesus be human? We don't like to see Jesus in this emotional anguish and struggle. But what if we knew that in a few hours we were going to be tortured, publicly humiliated, and executed in one of the most painful and brutal methods ever devised? How would we react?

This scene shows us the full humanity of Jesus as clearly as any other. *Jesus is alone.* He depends on the support of his friends and we let him down, we fall asleep when he asks us to watch with him. *Jesus is overwhelmed with sorrow and crushed with grief.* In a place where olives were crushed for their oil, he's being crushed. He feels a truly human anxiety in the face of death (M. Eugene Boring, *Matthew, New Interpreter's Bible*). *Jesus is humble.* Jewish people usually stood to pray, but Jesus falls to the ground as he prays. He asks his friends to pray with him and for him. If Jesus needed that, we surely do. Asking for prayer is not selfish. And Jesus prays for himself. He doesn't show false humility that says, "I won't fuss about myself. I'll think of those around me" (John Hiigel, *Partnering with the King* 251).

There's mystery and wonder here as God the Son prays to God the Father and struggles to do God's will. Jesus is the great high priest, consecrating himself to make the ultimate sacrifice. And Jesus is the Lamb about to be sacrificed for the sins of the world. It wasn't easy; it was agonizing.

The thorns in the painting represent that suffering. They remind us of the thorns that grew after the Fall in Genesis (3:18). Those thorns were part of the curse of sin that came because of the disobedience that began in another garden—Eden. The thorns in the painting also point toward the crown of thorns Jesus will be forced to wear. Jesus' obedience to the Father's will means he'll take the curse on himself and that will bring the blessing of redemption and deliverance from sin.

We remember the words of Scripture that Jesus emptied himself, humbled himself, became a servant, and was obedient even to death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8). We affirm that "for us and our salvation, he came down from heaven and was incarnate," in the flesh (*Nicene Creed*). But

sometimes we act like we don't really believe it, like he was just pretending, like his humanity wasn't real, and his suffering wasn't real. But they were. Jesus is fully God, God in the flesh, God with us. But he is also fully human, one of us and one with us.

Knowing the plan, knowing the need for the cross, knowing that completing his mission means suffering and dying, he still asks the Father if there might be another way. But then he comes to that moment of surrender and trust when he says, "Yet, not what I want, but what you want." "Not my will, but thine be done."

Jesus is living the prayer he had taught the disciples. He calls God "Father" like he teaches us to. He prays, "Thy will be done." He will warn the disciples to watch and pray so they don't fall into temptation or fall in the time of testing. Jesus goes through all this, he suffers and he prays this way for us, in our place. But he also does it as our example. He's a model for us of submission to God, of trust in God.

As Jesus faces the temptation to turn away from the cross, he knows his disciples will be tempted to turn away from him. Their faithfulness will be tested. So he tells them to watch and pray so they won't give in. But they keep falling asleep. Notice the sleeping disciples in the background of the picture. Their later failure when they abandon Jesus is a result of their halfhearted commitment to prayer.

Jesus comes back and finds them sleeping. In a way, that's not surprising. They've eaten a big meal. It's probably around midnight or after. They're sorrowful because of strange things that Jesus has said. But still Jesus tells them to wake up and pray.

Finally, after praying the third time to go another way, hearing Abba's "No," and surrendering to Abba's will, Jesus returns again to the disciples. He has surrendered, abandoned himself to God's will. With that settled, notice his boldness and the sense of triumph as he awakens the disciples again and goes to meet his betrayer and the mob coming to arrest him. He says, "Rise, let's go! The betrayer is coming."

Judas, one of the Twelve, one of the apostles, one whom Jesus chose and sent, this Judas comes leading a crowd armed with swords and clubs. They've come to arrest Jesus.

If you go to Jerusalem and go to the Mount of Olives, you can still see this olive grove. There are olive trees there that were a thousand years old when Jesus was there. You can go into the Church of All Nations. It's dimly lit. The ceiling has stars painted on it to depict that night. There's a mosaic at the front of the church portraying Jesus in prayer. There's an exposed rock formation that tradition says is the place where Jesus threw himself on the ground and prayed for the Father's will. You can kneel at that formation, touch it, and pray yourself.

We don't have to go to Jerusalem. You can imagine yourself kneeling there. But even better, we can know that Jesus is here with us. We don't have to go to Jerusalem to pray "not my will, but thine." We can pray it right here, right now. We don't have to be in the actual Gethsemane olive grove to say "not my will, but yours be done." We can pray it wherever we are. We don't have to kneel at the rock formation in the Church of All Nations to pray "not what I want, but what you want." We can make that surrender to God here in this church, or in our homes, or in our cars, or walking down the street, or at our job. We make that surrender once and for all, but we also make it again and again.

We're not surrendering to blind fate or cruel destiny. We're surrendering to the faithful purpose of a loving God—or the loving purpose of a faithful God.

Years ago, I read these lines and they've stayed with me:

Thou seemest human and divine,
The highest, holiest manhood, thou.
Our wills are ours, we know not how;
Our wills are ours, to make them thine. (Tennyson, *In Memoriam*,
<http://www.online-literature.com/tennyson/718/>)

After the prayer in Gethsemane, Jesus is arrested, tried, sentenced, and executed by being nailed to a cross. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). God with us, God in the flesh surrendered himself, faced evil and absorbed the worst it could do. He did it to rescue us, to restore us, to bring us back to himself.

Centuries ago, during a war in Spain, the Moors had laid siege to the capital. King Alphonso defended the city skillfully and bravely, but during a skirmish, the enemy captured the king's son. Knowing the king's love for his son, the attackers built a gallows in full view of the king who watched from the ramparts of his castle. The enemy leader ordered the prince to stand on the gallows under a sign which read, "Alphonso, either the city or your son!" What a heart-rending decision for a father to make! Anxiously Alphonso's advisers and officers watched the face of the king. Would he give up the city and allow the enemy to enslave the people? Would he let his son die? Alphonso quickly decided what he would do. He sent this message to the sultan: "My son will die that my people may live." And the king's son said, "Yes, Father, yes!" (I first heard Jim Buskirk tell this at FUMC, Tulsa; it's online in several places.)

There's a song I first heard some time ago that still moves me. It's Jesus telling some of his story:

Stay with me a while.
Well it may seem foolish, but I'm scared.
My beloved's yelling, "Crucify!"
It's as if no one ever cared.

Soldiers mock me with their songs.
They laugh because I'm naked and I'm weak.
Well I don't know how much longer I can go on.
When every breath I take is just to weep.

And for a moment time stood still,
To listen to the King of the hill.
And all the angels just stood still
To listen to the King of the hill.

Well I could've had servants
And I could have ruled this world as their King.
And I could have had wealth beyond measure.

I could have had anything, but it wouldn't have meant anything.

Not my will but Yours be done,
I had no agenda, only Your truth.
You were so proud to call me Son,
Now Father, I commit my soul to You.

And for a moment time stood still,
To listen to the King of the hill.
And I can hear you whisper still,
Father, I'm the King of the hill.

(Eli, as recorded on
Things I Prayed For, 1998)