



**Temple Baptist Church**  
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**The Agony of Gethsemane**  
**Matthew 26:30-46**

It was a cool, crisp springtime night in Jerusalem—a night like so many others, and yet so different.

It was Passover night, a night of *remembrance*. That evening, faithful Jews had relived what had taken place in Egypt more than 1300 years earlier. They had heard and relived the story once again of how God heard the cries of the children of Israel in Egypt and brought them out of Pharaoh's bondage with a mighty hand through His servant Moses.

As well as being a night of remembrance, it was a night of longing expectation. As they remembered, they also hoped—hoped for the Messiah to come and deliver them once again, this time from their bondage to Rome.

Jesus had eaten this Passover with His disciples just a few hours before. They too had remembered God's deliverance, and they too had eaten in hope. But the hope Jesus gave wasn't about deliverance from Rome, though they still didn't fully understand that. No, it was about God's kingdom coming in its fullness in ways they had never dreamed! What He was doing was far different from what His disciples were expecting. They were looking for earthly power and glory. But Jesus was looking to the cross, and the glory that lay *beyond* it.

Just a few days earlier, on the first day of that week, the people had welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem with great enthusiasm. It was what we mark on this first day of Holy Week, Palm Sunday. As He rode into the city on a humble donkey—the sign of his coming as a peaceable king, not a warrior—the crowds that entered with Him, some ahead of Him and others behind Him, had spread their cloaks and palm branches in the road before Him, praising Him as the coming king, the heir to King David.

So this Passover was a night of remembrance and now heightened expectation. But it was still more. *It was the night before Jesus would die on the cross for us.*

***A royal misunderstanding***

For several months Jesus had tried to prepare His disciples for what was going to happen. But just as we often are, they were a bit dense about it. In fact, Peter even once rebuked Jesus for even saying such a thing. Jesus, recognizing Satan's continual temptation to choose some other way than God's way, responded to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." (Matthew 16:23).<sup>1</sup> Even at the Passover Supper, Jesus had instituted *His* supper, telling them that the bread was His body and the cup was His blood of the covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. He had even warned them that one of them would betray Him that very night.

After the supper, Jesus had led His disciples out to the Mount of Olives. Along the way, He had told them that they would all desert Him. Again, Peter had objected and told Him that even if

everybody else deserted Him, he never would. But Jesus told Peter that before the rooster crowed the next morning, he would deny Him not once or even twice, but *three* times.

But they still didn't get it.

Jesus led them to a place on the Mount of Olives called Gethsemane. It was a grove of olive trees; the Gospel according to John calls it a garden. Some of the trees that stood there that night still stand there today.

Now the name *Gethsemane* meant "olive press"—a place where they pressed the precious oil from the olives. This was one of Jesus' favorite places, and He had come here to do one of His favorite things—*pray*.

He left eight of the eleven disciples who had come with Him at the entrance to Gethsemane, but He took Peter, James, and John with Him. And as they went a little farther, He began to share with this "inner circle" the burden of His heart—the grief and the horror that were coming on Him about what lay just ahead. He became overwhelmed with sorrow and His spirit was troubled. He told them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death" (26:38).

Peter, James, and John had seen emotion in Jesus before. They'd seen Him moved with compassion for the crowds, the sick, and demon-possessed. They'd seen Him frustrated with the Pharisees, and even angry when He cleansed the temple. But they'd *never* seen Him *like this*.

Jesus knew what was coming. He knew the emotional and physical suffering He would soon endure—the rejection and ridicule, the hard blows and excessive brutality of a flogging, and finally crucifixion.

But more than that, He knew that He was about to take the sins of the world on His shoulders in such loneliness and agony that the only way He would be able to give voice to His suffering and desolation would be to cry out with the psalmist, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1, Matthew 27:46).

*He knew.*

Sometimes out of reverence we tend to emphasize Jesus' divinity to the point that we neglect His humanity.

But in Gethsemane, we see Jesus' humanity on full display. Yes, He is fully and truly God. But here, maybe as much or more than anywhere else in the Gospel accounts, we see Him as fully and truly human.

Some years ago as I was reading this passage in my devotional time one morning, something jumped out at me that I'd never really noticed before. Only Matthew tells us this, but it's there at the end of verse 38. When Jesus told Peter, James, and John that He was deeply grieved, even to the point of death, He went on to urge them, "Stay here and watch with Me."

Think about that—"with Me."

In His growing agony, in His full and true humanity, as Jesus felt the weight of what was going to happen over the next twenty-four hours crushing His spirit, as He saw what He would go through as He bore our sins—just then, He needed His closest disciples to be near Him and to watch *with Him*.

### ***An honest prayer***

And then he went a little farther and fell on His face before the Father beneath those ancient, gnarled olive trees and began to pray.

As the distress seized Him, He plunged into a great struggle—His teachings and purpose versus His personal anxiety and the very human instinct to save Himself. And for the next hour

or so He agonized in prayer: “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will” (26:39).

Can you see Him in your mind’s eye, stretched out face down, agonizing before God? Luke tells us that His agony was so great that His sweat was “like great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Luke 22:44).

From the beginning of his ministry, Satan had tempted Jesus to be the Messiah the world wanted rather than the Messiah the Father sent Him to be. And now, as He faced the cross and everything that went with it, the struggle came once again: “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me” (26:39).

After about an hour, Jesus went back to Peter, James, and John. Despite His plea for them to keep watch with Him, He was alone in His agony. They were *asleep*. He woke them and said to Peter, who had declared he would die with Him even if everybody else left Him, “Could you not watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (26:40-41).

Jesus went back and prayed a second time, saying, “O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done” (26:42).

Then He came again to the three disciples and found them sleeping. Matthew describes them well; he says “their eyes were heavy” (26:43).

This time Jesus let them sleep, and He went away and prayed for the third time, praying the same thing, fully committing Himself to the Father’s will.

Does it strike you as interesting, as it does me, that while Peter slept, Jesus prayed *three times*, committing Himself fully to the Father’s will, while just a few hours later, Peter would deny Jesus *three times*?

Through His agony and struggle, Jesus found victory and strength to fulfill His mission in submitting to the Father’s will. You see, while he asked for the cup of suffering to pass from Him if possible, His prayer was tempered by, “nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.” *Through His agony in Gethsemane, Jesus reconciled His will for Himself with His Father’s will.* That enabled Him to face His passion and death in confident obedience, knowing that He was accomplishing God’s redemptive purpose through giving His life for us!

This was the critical *point of no return* for Jesus. If ever He was going to cut and run, this was the opportunity, His last chance. He committed Himself to follow through, to complete His mission of redemption, to submit to the Father’s will in loving, loyal obedience. He would die rather than deny His Father and His Father’s purpose.

### ***A submissive spirit***

Jesus calls us to follow Him, to be His disciples, to find our lives by losing them for His sake. As we follow Him, we’re to become like Him, striving to do as He would do. His agony in Gethsemane shows us what it means to be committed to the Father’s will no matter what. Jesus’ experience shows us that *at life’s critical points, we must learn to reconcile our will for ourselves with God’s will.* Though the intensity isn’t the same, the struggle is—to follow our will or God’s will. To one degree or another, we all at some point or points go through *the agony of Gethsemane*.

It might be in *critical decisions* about college, about marriage and family, about job or career or calling, about illness or death, or a host of other situations. Whatever the case, we all sooner or later face decisions that affect our lives and the lives of others. And in those decisions, the most

important issue comes down to this: *do we really trust Jesus, and are we really submitting to Him as our Lord?*

Somehow or another, we have to learn to pray genuinely, “Lord, *not* what *I* want, but what *you* want.” It’s a lot easier to say that than to pray it. And sometimes we think we mean it when we really mean it only up to a point. There’s been more than one occasion when the Lord showed me that I was like that little boy I heard about years ago whose teacher told him to sit down, and finally had to force him to sit down. Under his breath the little boy said, “I’m sittin’ down on the outside, but I’m standin’ up on the inside!”

When you think about it, this agony of Gethsemane isn’t just about us as individual disciples; it’s true for us as a congregation, a company of disciples, the body of Christ as well. There are times when God is leading us through things we don’t want to go through or into something that He wants us to be and do but we don’t want to be or do. Those are trying and anxious times. But they may be the agony of Gethsemane, when God is working in us to conform our corporate will to His will, so that *as a body* we’re willing to pray genuinely, “Not what we want, Lord, but what *You* want.”

But when you’re in Gethsemane, or when we’re there as a congregation, don’t ever forget this—our Lord Jesus understands the agony. He’s been there. It’s like one widow or widower ministering to another—Jesus knows what it’s all about, and understands. He knows what it’s like to agonize over the Father’s will. He knows the victory of submission. He understands like nobody else.

The hymn-writer James Montgomery has put it well:

Go to dark Gethsemane,  
You who feel the tempter’s power;  
Your Redeemer’s conflict see;  
Watch with Him one bitter hour;  
Turn not from His griefs away;  
Learn of Jesus Christ to pray.<sup>2</sup>

“Nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.” Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, New King James Version®.

<sup>2</sup> James Montgomery, “Go to Dark Gethsemane,” *The Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1991), #150.