

1. Praying in the Garden

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[0 : 00] Now let's pray together. Words of the Apostle John. Herein is love, not that we love God, but that he loved us and gave his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sin.

Father, we praise you for that wonderful love, the love that made the worlds and the love that sent your Son to redeem the worlds. We thank you for that love which meets us in the ordinary circumstances of our lives, and even more so meets us in the great times of crisis, in the times when we feel uncertain and unsure, and we remember that your Son, one with you, became one of us and suffered and died in our place.

Father, we praise you for this wonderful story, the story of the cross, the story of the way in which, by dying and rising again, the Lord Jesus Christ defeated sin and opened the kingdom of heaven to all who believe.

And so as we pause for a few moments today to open your word, to listen to what it has to say to us, and to hear its voice speaking in the deep places of our heart. Pray indeed that you will speak to us.

And we know, Father, that this is not just a message for those of us who are in the walls of this building. This is a message for the world, a message that the world needs to hear. And so we ask, Lord, that as we leave this place, that inspired by your love, challenged by the power of your word, we may indeed take that gospel to others, that others may indeed be set free, that others may become your children, and in turn pass that gospel on to their friends and all whom they meet.

[1 : 58] We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Now, in our Bibles, we are on page 882.

I say we are not going to be looking at the whole of this. As Luke's account is very detailed and quite long. But we're going to be, as it were, sinking some shafts into this story and listening to some of its meaning.

Jesus and his disciples have just celebrated the Passover feast together, which also, of course, becomes the Lord's Supper, the first feast of the New Age. And in verse 39, in fact, we're going to read on to verse 53.

They leave that place. Verse 39. And Jesus came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him.

And when he came to the place, he said to them, Pray that you may not enter into temptation. He withdrew from them about a stone's throw and knelt down and prayed, saying, Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me.

[3 : 11] Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done. And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

And when he arose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow. And he said to them, Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation.

While Jesus was still speaking, there came a crowd, and the man called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He drew near to Jesus to kiss him. But Jesus said to him, Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?

And when those who were around him saw what would follow, they said, Lord, shall we strike with a sword? And one of them struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his right ear.

But Jesus said, No more of this. And he touched his ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests and officers of the temple, and the elders who had come out against him, Have you come out as against a robber with swords and clubs?

[4 : 26] When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour and the power of darkness.

Amen. May God bless to us that reading from his word. On the 16th of October, 1555, in the center of Oxford, two English reformers stood side by side, ready to testify to their faith and to be burned at the stake.

These were two bishops who had fallen out with the establishment, Bishops Ridley and Letimer. Bishop Letimer spoke the famous words, Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. And we shall this day light such a candle in England, that by God's grace shall never be put out. Brave, stirring words, and both men faced their awful death in that confidence.

There are many other such stories about martyrs who gave their lives triumphantly. Read about some missionaries in Uganda in the 19th century who faced their death with singing, Daily, daily, sing of Jesus.

[5 : 52] These are stories which inspire, stories which challenge. But they're also very different from this story we've just read, aren't they?

Why is it that Ridley and Letimer and the Ugandan martyrs and many others have faced death apparently without trembling? And yet, Jesus Christ, our Lord, as he faced death, was afraid, shrank from it, and asked if the cup could be removed from him.

Now there are places on this planet, like at the tip of, the southern tip of South America, where many cross currents meet, where great waves clash together, and where there are massive surges, and something is going on underneath the surface.

And this is this story here today. There are massive currents flowing, cross currents running through this story. Now if you read the accounts of the cross in each of the Gospels, you'll find there are differences of emphases.

They all tell the same story, of course, that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Lord of glory, humbled himself to death, even the death of the cross, and that by dying, and by rising again, he opened the kingdom of heaven to all who believe.

[7 : 14] He offers pardon for sin, and a future in glory. Nevertheless, each Gospel has different emphases. Mark, for example, emphasizes the utter loneliness and isolation of Jesus.

Everybody gets it wrong, everybody misunderstands. In Luke, on the other hand, while not, of course, denying that, and while not, of course, contradicting that, nevertheless, the emphasis is rather different.

Jesus is a more commanding figure here, and in particular, and we'll see this as we go through this little series, at various points, people appear, sometimes, as in this case, a supernatural figure, other times, human beings, who comfort him, who speak to him, and who understand something of what's going on.

And always at the heart of it is the question that was raised back in chapter 21, verse 36, where Jesus says, stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place and to stand before the Son of Man.

Son of Man is going to trial and going to death, and yet Jesus is foretelling that one day all of us will have to stand before the Son of Man.

[8 : 39] Let in mind, let's look for some moments at this passage we read. There are three powerful cross currents flowing through this story. Three powerful forces are operating.

First of all, in verses 39 to 46, there is the power of prayer. Now, Luke has a great deal to say about prayer.

Now, I don't mean by, I don't mean that rather misleading statement, prayer changes things. Prayer, strictly speaking, changes nothing. Prayer puts us in contact with the God who changes things, the God behind the scenes who works everything according to the purpose of his will.

Now, I don't want to be misunderstood because I once went and said this in a church, and people said afterwards, Bob Files says, prayer is useless. Now, that is not what I said. What I said is, it's not prayer.

It is the God to whom we pray. Otherwise, if it were simply, if it were, prayer changes things, then we become like the pagans, as Jesus said. We would multiply words.

[9 : 48] We would be like the priests of Baal in the Old Testament, dancing around the altar and cutting themselves, behaving like dervishes. Nevertheless, prayer puts us in touch with the world, the unseen world, where things are changed.

And Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane. Luke doesn't call it the Garden of Gethsemane. He went out, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives. I think Luke deliberately does that, because I think he's looking back to chapter 21, where Jesus made that discourse on the Mount of Olives. We are talking about the Son of Man coming in power and great glory, and how people need to be ready to stand before the Son of Man. Now, there's two particular things I want you to notice. First of all, he went as was his custom. Now, a week or two ago, when Terry was preaching on Daniel chapter 6 and about Daniel praying, Terry pointed out, rightly, that Daniel didn't start praying when the crisis arose.

Daniel prayed three times a day as he normally did. Similarly here, Jesus does not simply start praying in Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives because of this crisis.

[11 : 05] This is what he has done regularly. practiced prayer, prayer that happens at other times, is now prayer in this great crisis.

And back in Luke chapter 18, in the story of the widow and the unjust judge, Jesus has said, people ought always to pray and not to give up.

That phrase, give up, is interesting. Give up what? Well, you could say, obviously, means don't give up praying. But I think Jesus is saying something more. I think he's saying, if we stop praying, we are giving up, in any meaningful sense of the word, Christian living at all.

So he prays. He prays as he usually prays on this night of crisis. Now, the other thing to notice about this prayer is that a curious mixture of loneliness and of support.

A number of yards away are the disciples. They are there, but they fall asleep. They don't recognize the seriousness of the situation.

[12 : 14] But the detail here that's in Luke and not in the other Gospels is in verse 43. There appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. Right throughout Scripture, angels are associated with prayer on earth.

The angel hosts who are God's ministers throughout the whole of the universe are profoundly associated with the prayers of God's people.

Once again, that happens in the book of Daniel. God sends his angel to Daniel, after all, in Daniel chapter 6. Prayer here, as I say, is touching the unseen world.

These are not just words that are being prayed. They're touching the unseen world. And of course, that brings us, as we are still thinking about prayer, to the nature of the prayer.

What Jesus actually prayed. Verse 43, Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. How do we reconcile Jesus' commitment to the will of God, Jesus' sense of his own purpose in coming, and the request for the removal of the cup?

[13 : 23] After all, Ridley and Latimer did not request the removal of the cup when they faced death bravely on that day in Oxford. Nor did the three Daniel's friends pray for the removal of the blazing furnace.

You may remember what they said, our God is able to deliver us, but even if not, we won't bow down to your image. Now, there's two things here, really, isn't there?

There's the emphasis on the sovereignty of God. Your will be done. And like Adam, the last Adam here, is faced with the temptation to go a different way.

As Son of Man, and it is a Son of Man, he triumphs. Remember, say, we must stand before the Son of Man. And if we're going to stand before the Son of Man, the Son of Man himself must face suffering and death.

And as the Son of Man, he looks out on a universe from which every trace of God seems to have vanished, which all the sense of the commitment to the will of God seems to have become intolerable.

[14 : 40] Jesus Christ knew what the will of the Father was. He came into the world knowing perfectly what would have to be done. And indeed, he knew that from all eternity. 1 Peter talks about the land slain before the foundation of the world.

I think the only way we can understand this story is to see that in Gethsemane and at Calvary, he willingly forgoes that knowledge and that confidence.

He truly becomes one of us. It's difficult, actually, once you say these kind of words, you mean to be struck by awe and trembling.

Bishop Ryle, who wrote expository thoughts on the gospel back in the 19th century, said of this passage, these are depths which we have no line to plumb.

Listen to these words of C.S. Lewis commenting on this passage. on that dreadful night, Jesus chose to face death and judgment like one of the most frightened of his followers and not like the heroes of his army.

[15 : 55] These martyr stories inspire us. I'd be terrified. I'd be terrified if I'd been Ridley or Latimer and I'd have recanted and run away. This story shows the Lord of Glory did not choose on that night to be someone like the heroes of his army, but to be someone, as Lewis says, the most frightened of his followers.

And the prayer is so intense, verse 44, his sweat became like great drops of blood falling to the ground. The power of prayer, prayer which touches the unseen world, prayer which mobilizes an angel from heaven to come to strengthen him.

And just one comment on that, how did the angel strengthen him? I believe probably what's meant here is the angel strengthened him by telling him this must be done and therefore it can be done. Called comfort in one sense, but nevertheless reassurance that he's in the center of the will of God. And just at this point, as the prayer ends, there enters another power, verses 47 to 51, the power of the establishment.

The prayer is over, but notice he still urges the disciples to pray. Verse 46, rise and pray. And a different kind of power now emerges.

[17 : 20] The power of the military, the power of the state, which of course in outward terms is far more powerful than the power of prayer. No one except the Lord was aware of the angel or indeed of the twelve legions of angels whom Jesus said the Father would send him instantly.

I think Luke emphasizes two things here. First of all, the betrayal he drew and the man called Judas. Even the phrase the man called Judas shows the shrinking and horror that Luke felt for this man.

One of the twelve was leading him. He drew near Jesus to kiss him. The awfulness of this is underlined a number of ways. One of the twelve.

The betrayer. Now, I know, I know that many people have said that betray is a rather over-the-top translation.

They should be translated simply handed over. I've yet to discover how handing over a friend to those who want to destroy him is different from betrayal. I think we must see this in its full horror.

[18 : 29] This is betrayal. A group of writers, prominent writers, were having a chat together one evening and the conversation turned to which of the great figures of the past would you have liked to have met?

And the obvious people were mentioned, Shakespeare, Alexander the Great and the like. And one of them said, I would most of all like to have met Judas Iscariot. that caused amazement as you can imagine.

And one of his friends says, why? And he replied, I would like to have seen the man who could have looked into the face of the Son of God accompanied with him for three years and afterwards betrayed him.

He recognized the awfulness of this and it's very dramatic. While he was still speaking, he almost said, look, look who it was, it's Judas and the kiss trying to disguise the death goal nature of the attack.

Once again, notice exactly what Jesus said, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?

Remember the verse I've quoted already that you will be able to stand in all these, resist all these things and stand before the Son of Man.

[19 : 47] So we have betrayal. and we have violence. Now the disciples don't understand. They're overwhelmed by the establishment. They want to fight it with its own weapons.

Verse 51 of them, one of the other Gospels say it was Peter. Peter in his impetuosity and of course in his total loyalty to Jesus, one of them struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his right ear. They don't understand that if they try to fight this power with its own weapons, they are going to be defeated. It's Jesus' own submission rather than their violence that controls the scene.

But the establishment has real power. They're going to see this in the arrest and in the trial. But yet, the weapons used here, betrayal and violence, contain within them the seeds of their own destruction.

So the power of prayer, the unseen world, the world where it all happens but it is invisible and therefore difficult to believe in.

[20 : 57] The establishment where it all appears to happen is just too visible. But right through Scripture, that is the choice faced of people of faith. Instead of Moses that he endured because he saw him who is invisible, trusting the invisible God, the unseen God, against very visible opposition.

But there is a third power in the last few moments in verses 52 and 53. The power of darkness. This is your hour and the power of darkness.

And the establishment is relativized here. And the real enemy is identified. What's really happening here? This is not simply the arrest of a political agitator, of a troublemaker, of someone who has offended the authorities and someone whom the establishment want to get rid of.

This is a battle between the power of darkness and the power, of course, represented by the angel appearing from heaven. This is a real power. This is what's happening behind the scenes.

Evil, however, has its moment. This is your hour and the power of darkness. Now, Luke's told us at the beginning of his gospel that the Son of Man has come to shine on those living in darkness.

[22 : 24] So, already at the beginning of the gospel, this theme of darkness is established. And this story is to culminate in the three hours of darkness on the cross.

And the irony, of course, is that the cross while appearing to be the way that darkness triumphs, in fact, ensures its defeat, we sang, when their triumph looked complete, was for me, O Lord.

When it seemed like your defeat, they could not see, O Lord. And when you spoke with kingly power, they made me free, O Lord. Evil, however, has its moment.

This is your hour in the power of darkness. And evil, of course, wants to destroy Jesus, and evil wants to destroy Jesus' followers.

And Jesus, even at this darkest moment, is concerned for his friends. And we are going to see, as we go through the next chapters, how the power of evil seems to be winning.

[23 : 35] So you see, there are these three powers. One of them, totally visible. The other two, invisible. The power of prayer, which is not prayer itself as such, but in touch with the Lord, with the angels, the archangels, all the company of heaven.

The power of darkness, which of course always hides behind its human agents. Which is why Paul tells us in Ephesians 6, we are not wrestling against flesh and blood.

Well, we often are, but that's not the real enemy, but against the principalities and powers, the world rulers of this darkness. And just as we finish, there's a question that faces us all.

Did we sing this hymn at the beginning with true meaning? When you prayed beneath the trees, it was for me, O Lord.

Can we all say that from the very depths of our heart? That this man, the Son of Man, the Lord of Glory, stood in for us on that dreadful occasion and gave his life that we might live.

[24 : 44] May that be true of everyone in this room. Amen. Let's pray. God our Father, as we look into the depths of this story, see something of the cross currents.

And as we live our lives in the very visible world, the world of the establishment, the world of the everyday, help us never to forget there are powers of darkness which seeks to destroy us.

But there is the power of heaven, the power of God, and of his angels which are there on our behalf. And so indeed, Lord, give to us confidence in the victory of the gospel, the victory of the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.

Amen.