

AGONY IN THE GARDEN

By Ben Stokes

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 26:36-46

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."

OBSERVATION

There is a fierce war that is taking place in the life of every Christian, and Matthew takes us into the heart of this battle. Jesus was headed to the cross, and He did something on this first Good Friday and Easter unlike anything that the world has ever seen! The stunning reality is that while on this journey, Jesus was teaching us powerful truths regarding His master plan of redemption. Specifically, the Gethsemane experience teaches us that 1) it was in agony that Jesus battled His way to the cross and 2) we are invited into this fight.

Battle to the Cross

Jesus' prayers at Gethsemane are the window through which we are able to see this internal fight waging within Jesus. The words of His first prayer, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death" expresses to us how Jesus' heart had been overcome with sadness, hopelessness, and anguish. The depth of agony made it seem impossible for Jesus to take one more step in this mission as He fought against being paralyzed by the effects of the weight of His sorrow. He turned again to His Father, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will but as You will." Is there another way to carry out God's purposes? Is drinking the cup of sorrow the only option?

Luke shares with us that after Jesus' first prayer, "there appeared to Him an angel from heaven, strengthening Him." There was no other option for Jesus. The cross was His mission and He would not be given a way around, but He would not be alone. God would be giving Him the strength He would need for endurance. Jesus' perspective then moved from "take this cup away" to "give Me success in drinking this cup, to do Your will, and finish the mission on the cross."

The agony of death sought to lure Jesus off the path of obedience, but Jesus stood immovable in His resolve to be obedient to His Father. He never wavered from His mission; if He had, everlasting death for all would have won the victory. Jesus fought this battle through His prayers, pleading to His Father for strength. God answered Him by sending an angel to strengthen Him for the task at hand.

Battle for Jesus' Disciples

Peter, James, and John were invited to join Jesus at Gethsemane. They were given specific instructions by Jesus to stay awake and be spiritually vigilant. He set the scene up this way because He wants us to understand that we are included in His redemptive mission!

The disciples were left to pray, but both times that Jesus returned to them following His prayer, He found them asleep. They failed to be obedient. In Matthew 26:41, Jesus explained to them why their obedience to prayer was necessary. While they had verbally committed to follow Jesus no matter what, Jesus explained that their flesh was weak. They were about to face the hardest temptations of their lives. The enemy was seeking to destroy them, and if they were not vigilant, they would fail to endure.

The disciples joined Jesus in the battle of Gethsemane by sleeping. The outcome for them is given to us in Matthew 26:56. "Then all the disciples left Him and fled." They experienced defeat. But the wonderful news for us is that Jesus was not defeated at Gethsemane but endured with faithful obedience. He not only laid down His life for His sheep, but He also prayed that their faith, though weak, would be strengthened all the more.

Jesus' lessons to us from Gethsemane:

- Jesus battled the harsh realities of sadness, hopelessness, and anguish on His journey of obedience toward the cross. In the face of agony, He stayed vigilant, clinging to the strength given to Him by His Father.
- Jesus invites His disciples to come with Him into this battle. He is doing a work of salvation for all peoples, and He intends to do this work with His disciples by His side. He invited His disciples into the battle at Gethsemane to show us how to fight, suffer, and experience victory with Him. We make a difference in this world

by overcoming temptation and sharing Jesus' victory over death with all peoples of the world.

OBEDIENCE

During this Easter season we need to be reminded afresh of the victory Jesus purchased for us on the cross. Yes, through the work of Jesus we are free from the enslavement of sin, but that does not mean it will be without a fight. We will still battle against all lusts in ourselves and evil desires that seem to hold us captive. We must make a declaration of war against our own sinful impulses such as:

- Obsession with food
- Alcohol
- Pornography
- Money
- Approval of others
- Anger
- Racism

PRAYER

Father, thank You for using Your word to take us to a place where we can see in a tangible way how Jesus our Savior strived toward victory in the midst of agony. I pray for those people who are right now in the middle of their own Gethsemane moment, facing agony, anguish, disappointment, grief, and sorrow—seeming like the enemy is coming against them wave after wave. Just as You strengthened Jesus to drink the cup of agony, I ask that You strengthen us in that same way to stay the course on Your mission. I also ask that You help those of us who know Your perfect will but are being tempted right now to abandon Your mission. Set our eyes on the victory You have won for us. Help us to resist the temptation to turn from You and follow our own desires. In these Gethsemane-like days graciously teach us how to walk with humility, be diligent in prayer, resist temptation, surrender to You in obedience, and follow You at any price. Thank You for showing us love as You suffered for us and embraced the agony of the cross and defeated death that we might live. Amen.