

July 17, 2011

Matthew 6:5-15 / I Thess. 5:12-18 / Luke 22:39-46

The Temptation Resisting Power That Comes Through Prayer

Today, as one preacher has put it, we get to enter, "***the sanctus sanctorum (or the holy of holies) of Jesus heart.***" We get to witness the emotional anguish that was caused / when the enormous burden of what He was about to experience fell with full force upon His soul / and He struggled with every ounce of His strength / to come to that necessary and peaceful surrender / to the unchangeable and immutable will of God for Him.

You see, this really is a profound passage. For in it we see so clearly, the full deity and full humanity of the Lord Jesus / as He wrestles with the impending onslaught of a death so physically painful / and so spiritually agonizing / that, "***His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.***"

It's a prayerful interchange that's hard for us to even imagine. Because few (if any of us) have ever wrestled so intensely with God in prayer that it caused us to, "***sweat, as it were, great drops of blood***" -- sweat caused by the inner agony of a soul fighting to remain at rest when it runs headlong into the wall of God's the immutable and unalterable will.

I DID on one occasion leave a puddle of tears on a desk after praying. But I have NEVER prayed so hard that I left behind a puddle of sweat! Not even close!

So what I'd like to do today (since the passage affords us the opportunity) is look at two things: **FIRST**, the fight that we also have inside when we (like Jesus in this passage) run up against the unthwartable and determinate will of God for our lives.

And **SECOND**, the function prayer is meant to serve when we engage in that conflict. And as this passage shows, it is frequently an intense conflict! Or better yet, an all-out-war within the soul!

So, let's begin by looking **FIRST** at what it is that causes this agonizing prayerful encounter between Jesus and His heavenly Father, and then go on to see how it is that it can apply to us.

And let me begin by saying (contrary to the opinion of many) that the issue here is NOT simply a matter of Jesus being afraid of the painful death He is about to experience. / If that were all that's going on here, it would be a reason to question both Jesus deity and His manliness, and could even be a reason for rejecting Him and the faith.

For as many opponents of the faith have pointed out: There have been countless men and women throughout history who have faced equally painful torture and death, yet done it with far less fear and anguish than Jesus.

In fact, Celsus (the learned Roman philosopher and hater of Christianity who lived around 175 A.D.) pointed that out that very thing when he asked: "**How can one who is divine, mourn and lament and pray to escape the fear of death...?**" He'd seen many Roman soldiers face death fearlessly.

And thus Celsus used this passage / and the fearful anguish Jesus has at His impending death / not only to call into question His deity / but to call into question His manliness. Since so many others throughout history faced equally painful things, with so much less fear and internal agony.

Yet, it's at this very point that I take exception to the understanding that it was simply the physical pain, or even death itself, that Jesus wanted to avoid. Not so! He DOES ask if there might be any other way to accomplish what needs to be accomplished (if there might be a way other than the cross to accomplish the redemption of sinners).

But the fear He wrestles with and the thing He seeks to avoid is NOT (in my opinion) the physical suffering he will endure or even death itself -- as excruciatingly painful as all of that will indeed be.

Rather, the part of the cross that causes Jesus so much internal agony, and makes Him yearn so intensely for an alternative way / is the fact that HE

KNOWS that His Father is going to ***"make Him who knew no sin, to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."***
 (II Cor. 5:21)

He KNOWS that He will not only DIE for the sins of all who will believe, He will "be made sin for them!" That's what Paul declares. And Peter also adds: ***"He bore our sins, in His body, on the tree."*** / Which means He would also bear the full brunt of God's wrath for each one of them -- ALL AT ONCE!

Can you imagine it? ALL the sins of ALL God's people / from EVERY age and EVERY place (some so vile and horrible I can't even venture to mention them from the pulpit) all poured out upon Jesus in one, dark, bleak, horrifying instant / as the full fury of God's wrath punished each one to the utmost degree -- in the BODY of the holy, sinless, Son of God who never so much as sinned even once -- not in the slightest way.

He to whom sin was TOTALLY FOREIGN, becomes both SIN, and a SIN OFFERING, making atonement for each individual sin, of every person who would ever believe, as He died there on the cross! It boggles the mind!

How indescribably horrible the agony of soul must have been, when He paid in full the complete sin-debt of all who would ever believe. Now (hopefully) you can see why He would ask if there were any other way!

For God the Son, who had never experienced anything but the sheer delight of His Father's love (from all eternity past) would now bear the brunt of His Father's eternal wrath against all our sins. / For the FIRST and ONLY time in all the long history of eternity, God the Father would forsake and turn His face away from His dearly beloved Son.

And I dare say it was the CONTEMPLATION OF THAT SUFFERING / along with the added fact that there was no other way to accomplish the redemption of lost sinners / which caused Jesus such anguish of soul / that He would quite literally, ***"sweat, as it were, great drops of blood."***

So, to those who ask: *"Couldn't God have purchased our redemption in some other way?"* What's the answer? If He could have, then He would have! He would have spared His beloved Son the agony of that torment! Including the agony He experiences in this passage, precisely because He KNOWS there IS no other way! He must go to the cross!

The plan of redemption had been established from eternity past, and it must now be fulfilled, regardless of the horrible pain Jesus must bear because of it. That's what Jesus comes to grips with in this time of prayer: The unalterable fact of God's sovereign and unchangeable will for His life.

And my friends, let me say this: You as well will never fight harder in your spirit / or with God in prayer... / You will never pray with more forcefulness or emotional intensity or soul anguish / than when YOU want to do one thing with all your heart / or would prefer to do something else / and yet you also run headlong into the unthwartable, unalterable and immutable will of God for your life.

The hardest battle you will ever fight in your life / is when you want something so bad you can taste it (some dream, career or relationship) and yet you sense (or better yet, you know) that God is calling you to leave it all behind / to pursue or do something else for Him.

Because in SUCH CASES, the hardest words you will ever bring yourself to speak are the words: ***"NOT MY WILL BUT THINE BE DONE."*** We saw that with Moses. He was living a quiet life as a shepherd, tending his father-in-laws' sheep in Midian, when God speaks to him and calls him to the task of leading the people of Israel out of Egypt.

"Go," says God, ***"I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."***

Does he have a choice? Not really. He does resist / and tries to weasel his way out of it four times / using almost every excuse in the book / even provoking the anger of God by his continued resistance -- that is, until he realizes God will not take "no" for an answer!

The same was true for Jonah. God called him to preach to the people of Nineveh. But instead, he heads off in the opposite direction -- his way of saying he didn't want to -- only to discover it was the wrong answer! God wasn't going to take no for an answer!

But that's the whole point! The issue is *not*, "Do I want to?" God didn't ask Moses or Jonah or Paul if they wanted to do the task He was calling them to do. Not at all! Because the real issue is never whether we want to or not! The real issue is whether God is "calling us" to or not! That's the real issue! Because if God is calling me to do something, I don't really have a choice not to -- not really!

We see that same thing with Paul. Did Paul willingly volunteer to be the apostle to the Gentiles? Did God post a "help wanted sign" that said, "*NEEDED: Motivated man to take the Gospel to the Gentiles.*" Or did He simply tell Ananias before Paul even knew it: "***This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles...***"

Did Paul chose his calling, or did he simply yield to a calling that God had chosen Him? You've read the story. Did he volunteer or did he surrender after a fight?

You see, people don't tend to put up an huge, agonizing FIGHT against an optional, "you can do it if you want to, but don't have to if you don't want to" type choice! It doesn't happen. The huge, emotional, agonizing FIGHT comes in when they sense or know or can't shake the conviction that God (as with Moses, Jonah, Peter, Paul and Jesus) has chosen or called them to do a certain thing, and will not take "NO" for an answer!

Likewise, being called as opposed to simply choosing, makes a big difference in other ways as well: I've known people who have volunteered for some task / yet gave up easily when their plans were blocked / or things got difficult. / Something that happens far less frequently when people sense that God has CALLED THEM to a specific task or place.

Read the missionary stories! Who are the ones who stick it out no matter how difficult things get? It's the ones who sense they've been called to that specific place and that specific people or ministry by God. It's the ones that believed God had something for them to do there that only they could do.

Yet the initial resolve to surrender to the call doesn't usually happen without a fight! And I say that from experience. I never wanted to be a pastor. I wanted to be an engineer (actually, I wanted to be a carpenter but my father forbid it)!

So when I sensed God say to me (at 11 years old) *"I want you to be a pastor"* (and I can still remember the spot I was sitting in the woods when I heard those exact words in my head) -- it took me so by surprise, and so shocked me (since I wasn't even a Christian yet), that I spent the next twelve years fighting and running from that call.

It was July of 1968, and the battle would rage, in unrelenting fashion, until December 31 of 1981. I had come to Christ a year earlier (on Jan. 7, 1980) still refusing to entertain the notion of going into the pastorate.

In fact, I'd struck a deal with God. I told Him I would give Him 2 years as a short term missionary in the Dominican Republic, and in return, He would release me from the lifelong call to the pastorate. Which I, being a new believer and not knowing God too well, thought was a pretty fair deal!

Yet by December of 1981 (one year later) it all came to a head. So miserable, depressed, and in total agony of spirit, I decided to have it out with God.

So when everyone else at the mission station in Jarabacoa went out to celebrate New Year's Eve, I went away by myself to an out of the way little house, laid on the floor, and had it out with God -- telling Him to kill me. *"I'd rather die,"* I said, *"than spend the rest of my life as a pastor."*

Yet after 3 agonizing hours where I tried my hardest to get God to change His mind, without God releasing me from the call, I finally came to the point (totally drained and exhausted from fighting with Him) that I said these words: *"Ok, Lord, I will."*

And you know what happened? As soon as I spoke those words, an incredible sense of peace flooded my soul! In fact, I wrote to a friend and said: *"The sense of peace that flooded my soul was so overwhelming, that I found myself wondering why I had fought the call 12 long years."*

What about you? Are YOU fighting the call of God? / Is there something you sense He wants you to do, but you're resisting it? / Have you found yourself saying to God, "I would Lord, but..." / And if you are resisting His call, because of the upheaval it would cause in your life, has it robbed you of your peace / and made you irritable, touchy and all bound up inside? Folks, I remember the fight so well, and all that it entails!

Is there something God is asking you to do that you're in the "I can't" / or the resisting stage? Is the turmoil in your soul mounting and becoming more intense? Because if it is, **YOU NOW KNOW** the only thing that will bring it to an end / and restore to your soul the peace that passes all understanding -- right? It's the words: *"I will Lord."* The words: ***"Not my will, but Yours be done."***

They're NOT easy words to speak / especially when you KNOW that what you're saying "yes" to, will drastically change your life / or turn your world upside down! But they are the words you need to say.

Which brings us to the **SECOND** issue: The issue of how prayer works in regard to this whole process. And for this I'm going to do something I don't usually do. I'm going to use the acrostic - **P.R.A.Y.** / When you're wrestling with those aspects of the will of God that are unalterable or immutable -- remember these four letters: **P - R - A - Y.**

The letter "**P**" in the word "pray" stands for **POWER**. Because there is nothing in this world that's more powerful than prayer! As Ole Hallesby once said: ***"The work of praying is prerequisite to all other work in the kingdom of God, for the simple reason that it is by prayer that we couple the powers of heaven to our helplessness... and make the impossible possible."***

Or as another has said: ***"The power of prayer is no more, or no less, than the mighty power of God released through the life of a person who stops***

being an obstacle to God... The power of prayer is omnipotent -- it is limited only by the limits that God Himself places on it.

And in the context of these verses, the power that God seeks to convey to us is the power to do His will. Which includes the power to keep us from falling into temptation. It's a point Jesus emphasizes not just once, but twice, when He says: ***"Pray that you will not fall into temptation."***

Prayer gives us temptation resisting power! And the preceding and following context make it pretty clear that the temptation He's referring to is the temptation to turn back from doing what they KNOW to be the calling and will of God for our lives -- difficult as it will be.

That's what we receive through prayer -- temptation resisting power. The power to do what God has called us to do / and never turn back / regardless of how hard it may get / or what difficulties we may face as a result.

Which brings us to the letter "R" which I will use for **RESIGNATION** -- the resignation of our will to the will of God. You see, the primary purpose of prayer is NOT to try and move God to do what WE want HIM to do. / It's to present ourselves before Him and ask Him to subdue our resistance to doing what HE wants US to do.

It's NOT to bend HIS will to fit with OURS, but to bend OUR will to fit with HIS!

If our prayers are nothing more than requests for God to do the things we ask of Him, then we have forgotten one of the most important purposes of prayer. To bring us to the point where we yield ourselves to doing what we know He wants us to do. Bringing about that yieldedness to God in our soul, is one of the primary purposes of prayer. So much so that it's one of the reasons many people avoid prayer!

They avoid prayer because when they pray, they will often sense God encouraging them to do something they don't want to do / or stop doing something they want to do. (Like sticking with a commitment they made but want to give up on / or forgiving someone who has hurt them deeply / or showing grace to someone that irritates them).

You see, Jesus whole purpose in praying here, is to bring about that necessary yieldedness and complete resignation to the Father's will. And after that's done, it's for the strength to stay the course.

In fact, prayer for that purpose is so important to one's yielding / and staying the course / and doing God's will / that God sends an angel to strengthen Jesus so He can pray all the more earnestly!

Which brings us to the letter "A" in the word **PRAY**. And for this I use the word ANGUISH. I know that doesn't often fit with our concept of prayer. But it is true -- prayer is a place God wants us to bring all that pent up frustration, and turmoil, and inner anxiety, or anguish and lay it at His feet!

In v. 44, after God sends an angel from heaven to strengthen Jesus, we read: ***"And being in ANGUISH, He prayed ALL THE MORE EARNESTLY -- and His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground."***

What was His purpose in praying so intensely? To pray until all his fears and inner anxiety and anguish had turned to peaceful resignation. / Peter understood this aspect of prayer as well, for he wrote years later: ***"Cast your cares upon Him, because He cares for you."*** Give them to God!

You see, the world has a way of darkening and dampening and confusing the soul. / It fills it with worries and stress and distractions and temptations! And it can wear us down and even oppresses us.

And prayer is the place that God calls us to let go of all that stuff! To take a spiritual bath so to speak! / To cast our cares on Him / and wrestle with Him / and even work through all our anger, fear, disappointments and anguish!

God wants us to labor and wrestle and agonize in prayer. So much so that He will even strengthen us in prayer to pray all the more earnestly, so that after the fight has ended, we may win the desired rest and release.

Which brings us to the "Y" of the word **PRAY**. And for that I use the word YOKED -- Yoked together with God or Yoked together with Christ. As Ole Hallesby said: ***"It is by prayer that we couple the powers of heaven to our***

helplessness... and make the impossible possible." To couple together and to yoke together are the same thing.

And in terms of living the Christian faith, or doing the will of God, there is nothing more important than being YOKED together with God and Christ.

Alone and in my own strength: ***I cannot fight the battles of the faith.
I cannot live the life I need to live.
I cannot be the person I need to be.
I cannot do the things I need to do.***

But being **YOKED** together with Him, and therefore His power and His grace -- ***"couples my helplessness together with the help or power of heaven, and makes the impossible possible."*** Don't EVER forget it!

That's why **Jesus** says: ***"Abide in Me, and I will abide in you. For no branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me... If a man remains in me, and I in him, then he will bear much fruit, for apart from Me, you can do nothing."***

There are few truths we need to be more convinced of than that one!