

Watch and Pray (Matt. 26:36–46)

By Jacob D. Gerber

Second only to the cross itself, Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane represents one of the greatest mysteries concerning the union of Christ's two natures (divine and human) in one person. Here, we see the eternal, infinite, omnipotent Son of God stumbling, sorrowful, anguished, and fearful to the point of death. Here, we see the one who is perfect light and life writhing uncomfortably under the dark shadow of death. Here, we see the one who was strong being made weak for us and for our salvation. Here, Christ models for us how we too ought to approach areas and moments of our own weakness by teaching us to *watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation*.

Sympathizing with our Weakness (Matt. 26:36–39)

Throughout this passage, we are confronted with the question of human weakness. The way that the passage deals with this issue of weakness is by a stark contrast between Jesus and his disciples. Whereas Jesus indeed comes to the bottom of his weakness, he strengthens himself through prayer. The disciples, however, fail to take the strength from prayer that they might, and they enter the evening's trials from a position of weakness rather than strength. The first place we see this contrast is in v. 36, when Jesus tells many of his disciples to stay at a distance while he goes to pray. As Calvin notes, this action “spares their weakness; as if a man, perceiving that he would soon be in extreme danger in battle, were to leave his wife and children in a situation of safety.”¹

Jesus, however, goes to pray, and it is probably significant that he expresses his desire to pray in v. 36 in the aorist aspect, which describes the entire course of an action (from beginning to completion) rather than an ongoing action with an undetermined ending. Lenski therefore suggests translating this as “‘to make a definite prayer and to complete it,’ not merely ‘to engage in prayer.’”² Jesus does not, however, leave all of his disciples at a distance. Instead, he takes his three closest disciples: Peter, James, and John (the “two sons of Zebedee”; v. 37a). Jesus desired that his friends should give him comfort in his hour of need, and also that they would prepare themselves for the evening's trials as they kept “watch” with him.³

As Jesus moved deeper into the garden, “he began to be sorrowful and troubled” (v. 37b). Jesus has known and spoken openly about his crucifixion and death. Now, however, as he prepares to enter into the actual work, he feels more keenly the weight of the crushing burden that he must soon bear. Calvin writes, “the true test of virtue is only to be found when the contest begins; for then the

¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:226.

² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 1037.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 1038.

weakness of the flesh, which was formerly concealed, shows itself, and the secret feelings are abundantly displayed.”⁴ At this point, Jesus makes his weakness known to these three disciples: “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me” (v. 38).

Jesus’ Fear (vv. 37–38)

In studying Jesus’ example in this passage, we must distinguish between weakness and sin. Here, Jesus’ weakness is on full display in his sorrowful and troubled soul, but at no point through this did he sin. The author of Hebrews draws this point explicitly: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). Along these lines, theologians have distinguished between natural fear and unnatural fear. Of natural fear, John of Damascus (676–759 AD) wrote that “fear is natural when the soul is unwilling to be separated from the body, on account of the natural sympathy and close relationship planted in it in the beginning by the Creator, which makes it fear and struggle against death and pray for an escape from it.”⁵ On the other hand, Jesus did not have what theologians call “unnatural” fear, which “arises from treachery of reasoning and want [i.e., ‘lack’] of faith, and ignorance of the hour of death, as when we are at night affected by fear at some chance noise.... This our Lord did not assume. Hence He never felt fear except in the hour of His passion....”⁶

God created us to cling to life and to fear death, so that it is good and proper for Jesus to fear death, generally speaking. Nevertheless, Jesus faced more than mere death, so that his fear became particularly acute “because he had before his eyes the dreadful tribunal of God, and the Judge himself armed with inconceivable vengeance; and because our sins, the load of which was laid upon him, pressed him down with their enormous weight.”⁷ This is an important point. While Jesus did not fear on account of his own sin, he feared because he would be taking upon himself the sins and the curse of the world. Thus, while he did not typically experience the kind of fears that we deal with on a regular basis, he felt the crushing weight of fear for the punishment of our sin under the wrath of God as he prepared to go to the cross (see 1 John 4:18).

Jesus’ Prayer (v. 39)

Jesus continued on alone, moving past Peter, James, and John, in order to pray without distraction.⁸ As he went, anguish enveloped him so that he fell on his face to pray, “saying, ‘My

⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:226.

⁵ John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, trans. S. D. F. Salmond (Aeterna Press, 2016), 120 (§23, “Concerning his Fear”).

⁶ John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 121 (§23, “Concerning his Fear”).

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:228.

⁸ “We have seen in other passages, that in order to excite himself to greater earnestness of prayer, the Lord prayed in the absence of witnesses; for when we are withdrawn from the gaze of men, we succeed better in collecting our senses, so as to attend more closely to what we are doing. It is not, indeed, necessary — nay more, it is not always proper — that we should retire to distant corners whenever we pray; but when some great necessity urges us, because the fervor of prayer is more freely indulged when we are alone, it is useful to us to pray apart. And if the Son of God did not disregard this aid, it would be the greatest madness of pride in us not to apply it for our own advantage.” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:229.)

Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” (v. 39). Jesus begins by addressing the righteous Judge of all the earth as “My Father.” France observes that this is the first of three echoes of the Lord’s Prayer, where Jesus had taught the disciples to address God as “Our Father” (Matt. 6:9).⁹ While some have argued on the basis of the grammar of this request that Jesus must have considered the question of his death to be open to change. This would be a theological problem, since Jesus has taught that his death had been fixed in eternity past by divine decree, and that the Scriptures had spoken plainly of it. Grammatically, however, Jesus himself had used the same kind of statement to express another impossible scenario: “if Satan casts out Satan...” (Matt. 12:26).¹⁰

It is better to understand Jesus, then, as modeling the posture of obedience in the midst of the deepest anguish. Calvin observes that “believers, in pouring out their prayers, do not always ascend to the contemplation of the secrets of God, or deliberately inquire what is possible to be done, but are sometimes carried away hastily by the earnestness of their wishes.”¹¹ Therefore, as Blomberg writes, “If Christ could plead as boldly as he did, we should feel free also to unload all our deepest desires before God.”¹² We should note, however, that although “the strength and violence of grief suddenly drew this word from his mouth,...he immediately added a correction.”¹³ That is, after asking for some way to avoid the “cup” of his suffering, he quickly added, “nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”

In what sense, then, does the will of Jesus differ from the will of his Father? The Third Council of Constantinople (680–681 AD) condemned as heresy the view that Jesus had only one will (*monothelism*). This view argued that the will is associated with the single person of Jesus, which would mean that God the Son has a distinct will from the Father, whose will is also distinct from the will of the Holy Spirit. The early church recognized, however, that if each of the persons possessed different wills, then they would be three gods rather than one God. Instead, theologians have recognized that a will is proper to a nature. Therefore, having two natures, Jesus possessed two wills in one person. While he shared a will with his Father according to his divine nature, we read here about the struggle of the weakness of his human will to submit to the Father’s will, in light of his fear of the dreadful task that he must undertake to carry it out.

How, then, can Jesus express a desire different from the Father’s will without sin? Indeed, as the Heidelberg Catechism Question #113 reminds us, the Tenth Commandment teaches “That not even the slightest desire or thought contrary to any one of God’s commandments should ever arise in our hearts. Rather, with all our hearts we should always hate sin and take pleasure in whatever is right.” How could Jesus desire and think about an alternative to dying on the cross without coveting

⁹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1004–05.

¹⁰ “...a first-class condition in Greek does not necessarily assume the reality of the protasis but only that the protasis is as real as the apodosis. The speaker assumes the reality of the protasis for the sake of argument but does not thereby indicate that the condition described in the protasis is, in fact, real. Were Blaising to apply his understanding of first-class conditional clauses to Matthew 12:26–27 and Mark 3:24–26, the result would be theologically incoherent....” (Carson, “Matthew,” 610.)

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:230.

¹² Blomberg, *Matthew*, 395.

¹³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:230–31.

sinfully? Calvin has an excellent answer to this question:

Though it be true rectitude to regulate all our feelings by the good pleasure of God, yet there is a certain kind of indirect disagreement with it which is not faulty, and is not reckoned as sin; if, for example, a person desire to see the Church in a calm and flourishing condition, if he wish that the children of God were delivered from afflictions, that all superstitions were removed out of the world, and that the rage of wicked men were so restrained as to do no injury. These things, being in themselves right, may properly be desired by believers, though it may please God to order a different state of matters: for he chooses that his Son should reign among enemies; that his people should be trained under the cross; and that the triumph of faith and of the Gospel should be rendered more illustrious by the opposing machinations of Satan. We see how those prayers are holy, which appear to be contrary to the will of God; for God does not desire us to be always exact or scrupulous in inquiring what he has appointed, but allows us to ask what is desirable according to the capacity of our senses.¹⁴

First, the qualification, “if it be possible,” frames Jesus’ request in a manner that perfectly upholds the goal of redemption, even if the request seeks a different means of accomplishing that redemption that would allow the “cup” to “pass” from him. Second, the insistence that the Father’s will be done, rather than his own will, connects the loop. Jesus prays for an alternative path, and yet he prays in a submissive manner.

Tempted as We are, Yet Without Sin (Matt. 26:40–41)

When Jesus returns to his disciples to check on them and to draw strength from their support, he finds them sleeping (v. 40a). Addressing Peter specifically, he asks, “So, could you not watch with me one hour?” (v. 40b). Lenski observes the irony here: “This brave, mighty Peter had promised to die with Jesus and now cannot even stay awake at his Master’s bidding!”¹⁵ Then, Jesus instructs his disciples to prepare themselves: “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation” (v. 41a). There is an important shift here from what Jesus had said earlier. Previously, Jesus had said, “watch with me” (v. 38). Now, Jesus tells them to “watch” so “that you may not enter into temptation” (v. 41a). With the warning not to enter into temptation, we have (as France noted, above) the second allusion back to the Lord’s Prayer: “Lead us not into temptation” (Matt. 6:13). Here, the disciples are to watch and pray for their own sake.¹⁶

To “watch” is to keep guard. The image is of a soldier caught behind enemy lines, with sentries trying to find him to capture or kill him. Such a soldier must remain alert and vigilant at all times because he understands the danger that lurks around every corner. Jesus describes this danger by warning them not to “enter into temptation.” John Owen offers the best explanation for what this expression means when he differentiates entering into temptation from (1) mere temptation, (2) the

¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:231–32.

¹⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1041.

¹⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1041.

ordinary work of Satan and our own lusts to tempt us toward sin, and (3) being conquered by a temptation to commit sin.¹⁷ Instead, Owen argues that to “enter into temptation” is to be *entangled* by it:

It is, as the apostle expresses it, “to fall into temptation” (1 Tim. 6:9), as a man falls into a pit or deep place where [there] are gins [traps] or snares, wherewith he is entangled; the man is not presently killed and destroyed, but he is entangled and detained—he knows now how to get free or be at liberty....When we suffer [allow, permit] a temptation to enter into us, then we “enter into temptation.” While it knocks at the door we are at liberty; but when any temptation comes in and parleys [discusses (especially with an enemy)] with the heart, reasons with the mind, entices and allures the affections, be it a long or a short time, do it thus insensibly and imperceptibly, or do the soul take notice of it, we “enter into temptation.”¹⁸

Christ was tempted, to be sure; however, when tempted, his thoughts and affections were not entangled into the object of temptation. Rather than ponder the temptation as a serious possibility, he flatly rejected every offer the devil made him (Matt. 4:1–11). Owen argues that it is our duty to avoid entering into temptation because “Christ had only the *suffering* part of temptation when he entered into it; we have also the *sinning* part of it....We never come off like Christ. Who of us ‘enter into temptation’ and is not defiled?”¹⁹

Toward the end of avoiding entering into temptation, Jesus enjoins Peter not only to watch, but to pray. We must indeed be vigilant, but, “Our *watching*...will be of no avail without *prayer*.”²⁰ Thus, Jesus warns that, “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (v. 41b). Here, the “spirit” likely refers to “the new divine life, we may call it faith,” while the “flesh” does not refer merely to the body, nor to our indwelling sin (as Paul uses the term), but to our frailty as creatures.²¹ Even Jesus’ flesh was weak, so that weakness is not, in itself, sinful. The problem of the flesh’s weakness, though, is that we cannot depend on our flesh to deliver us from temptations that arise. Jesus resorts to prayer in order to gain the strength from his Father and from the Holy Spirit that his flesh cannot offer to him in his hour of trial. Much more do we need to pray, since we not only battle temptations themselves, but we also battle the lusts of our sinful flesh.

Draw Near to the Throne of Grace (Matt. 26:42–46)

So, leaving his disciples behind, Jesus returns to pray a second time: “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done” (v. 42). France writes, “The second prayer is not simply a repeat of the first. It suggests that Jesus now knows the answer to the request of v. 39, and has

¹⁷ John Owen, “Of Temptation: The Nature and Power of It. The Danger of Entering into It. And the Means of Preventing That Danger with a Resolution of Sundry Cares Thereunto Belonging,” in *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 159–60.

¹⁸ Owen, “Of Temptation,” 160.

¹⁹ Owen, “Of Temptation,” 183.

²⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:235.

²¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1041–42.

accepted that no alternative is possible. In that case there can be only one course for Jesus to take: ‘Let your will be done.’ This is the third echo in this pericope of the wording of the Lord’s Prayer (6:10), and shows that Jesus not only instructs his disciples in how to pray but himself follows the same principle.”²² As the disciples sleep on, Jesus is drawing increasingly strength to meet the task that lies ahead.

When Jesus returns again to his disciples, they are still sleeping (v. 43). Jesus does not seem to wake them, but heads back to pray “for the third time, saying the same words again” (v. 44). The phrase for “same words” does not necessarily mean that Jesus repeated verbatim what he had already said. Rather, the phrase is in the singular: “the same *word*” (lit.). We might translate this as Jesus’ praying “about the same matter,” in order to avoid thinking that Jesus was simply repeating the same words again and again. Indeed, the absence of speech suggests that the trajectory has continued. Whereas Jesus’ first prayer was the most in anguish, and whereas the second prayer expresses Jesus’ resolve, Matthew does not tell us the words of the third prayer.²³ It seems that we are meant to understand that Jesus is continuing to take strength from his Father as he finalizes his resolve to go to the cross.

After praying a third time, Jesus came to wake his disciples: “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” (vv. 45–46). At the beginning of this scene, Jesus had been the one burdened by severe weakness. Now that he has spent this hour in prayer, he is prepared to face the path ahead. Jesus’ disciples, however, have spent this time sleeping, so that they are unprepared for what is about to happen.²⁴ Those who had vowed never to fall away from Jesus will soon, in a moment of weakness, all fall away (Matt. 26:56).

Earlier, I quoted Hebrews 4:15, regarding how Christ can sympathize with us in our weakness, since he was tempted as we are, yet without sin. In the next verse, the author of Hebrews applies that doctrine: “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16). This is what the disciples should have been doing in the garden, but did not. This is what we should do, but often do not. Yet, the gospel tells us that Christ’s mercy and grace are always available to us in the time of need. By faith, let us draw near with confidence to his throne of grace!

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Jesus left many of his disciples behind while he went to pray (v. 36)? Why do you think that Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John (v. 37)? How should we understand the depth, reality, and fullness of the sorrow, anguish, and fear that Jesus suffered in Gethsemane (v. 37–38)? How should we understand his prayer for the cup of suffering to pass from him, when he knew that it was the Father’s will for him to die on the cross (v. 39)?

²² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1006.

²³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1001–02.

²⁴ “The sleepers for whom he would die have lost their opportunity to gain strength through prayer. By contrast, Jesus has prayed in agony but now rises with poise and advances to meet his betrayer.” (Carson, “Matthew,” 611.)

2. Why were the disciples sleeping (v. 40)? What does this tell us about their weakness in comparison and contrast to Jesus' weakness? How does their sleeping contrast with the boasts they had made only a little earlier that same night (Matt. 26:33–35)? What does it mean to "watch" (v. 41a)? Why must we "pray" (v. 41b)? What does it mean to "enter into temptation" (v. 41c)? What does Jesus mean when he warns us that the spirit may be willing, but the flesh is weak (v. 41d)?

3. How is Jesus' prayer in v. 42 different from his prayer in v. 39? What does this difference tell us about the effectiveness of his prayers so far? How does Jesus' strengthening resolve to suffer inform us about what we are doing when we go to the Lord in prayer? What does Jesus teach us here about seeking the will of God, even when that will lead us into times of trial and sorrow? During such moments, what can prayer do for us?

4. What difference did it make that Jesus spent this time praying while his disciples slept? How does this account for Jesus' calm and faith-filled response when he encounters Judas, in distinction from the sinfully angry and fearful responses of his disciples in Matthew 26:47–56? What does Hebrews 4:14–16 teach us about the help that Jesus offers to sinners like us? How does Paul's threefold prayer both follow Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane and teach us how to pray (2 Cor. 12:8–9)?