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The Agony of the Garden

Matthew 26:36-46

Pastor Bryan Clark

The story started in a garden and what a magnificent garden it was—a place of unimaginable pleasure, a place where God delighted in Adam and Eve, and Adam and Eve delighted in God. And it was all very good until…until Adam and Eve believed that, by being their own gods, they could make life better—and they chose to disobey God's command. And immediately sin enters into the picture and everything starts falling apart. Now they're afraid of God; they're hiding from God, feeling the shame and the nakedness of their sin. They begin to blame one another and everything's coming unraveled. Every single one of us here this morning feels the consequences of the choice they made and for sure each of us has made our own contribution to the mess that we find in the world today.

Adam and Eve were sadly escorted by an angel of God out of Paradise. But literally hours after that first sin, God made a promise. He made a promise that He Himself would do what is necessary to once again bring life out of death—that a seed of a woman, a man—a human being—would somehow crush the head of the serpent and, in the end, God would win! There was the slightest hint that it would include the shedding of blood to somehow cover the shame of sin. For thousands of years the Hebrew people believed that God had made a promise, that God would send a Messiah, that God would send One, a seed of a woman, to be the Savior of the world. There were many times along the way where it all seemed hopeless and they wondered if God would ever keep His promise...until that first Christmas night when it finally happened! The seed of a woman, born of a virgin, God in the flesh entered into our world to be the Savior of the world.

John the Baptist would say, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Jesus Himself would say that He had come to seek and to save those who are lost and to give His life as a ransom for many. There was no doubt from the beginning that the mission of Jesus would end up on a cross where His blood would be shed to fulfill the promise that God had made.

This morning we pick up the story less than twenty-four hours away from the horrific event of the cross. If you have your Bible, turn with us to Matthew, Chapter 26. The story started in a garden and the garden was Paradise. We pick up the story in another garden, a garden that would be sheer agony. Verse 36:

> **Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. Then He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me."**
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> (*NASB, Matthew 26:36-38)

Jesus has just spent the evening with His disciples in the Upper Room. It's Thursday evening; they partook of the Passover feast together and Jesus identified Himself as the fulfillment of Passover. He was the fulfillment of the elements; He was the Passover Lamb. It would be His body that would be broken and His blood that would be shed or there could be no forgiveness of sin. They left the Upper Room and they walked to the Garden of Gethsemane. The name Gethsemane means *olive press or oil press*. It creates the imagery of this press that would squeeze these olives with such

pressure, with such tension to squeeze out the very last drops of oil. It creates an imagery of the unimaginable stress that Jesus would feel in this garden.

He takes with Him into the heart of the garden Peter, James and John—His three closest friends. Jesus doesn't take them this time to teach them; He doesn't take them to disciple them; He takes them because He needs them. He needs His friends with Him to give Him the strength He needs to endure what He is about to experience in the garden. The phrase **My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death**...is an Old Testament phrase that literally references stress or tension that is so great it's actually life threatening, and Jesus is feeling that. Verse 39:

> **And He went a little beyond *them*, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will."**

It would be fair to say that the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane was the most intense prayer in all of human history, as both the Father and the Son would agonize over what is to come. Jesus falls on His face and cries out to the Father. One might ask the question, "Throughout church history there have been many Christian martyrs who have gone to horrific deaths, seemingly more bravely than Jesus. What's happening here? I mean, think about it. This is the Jesus that had the courage to stand up to the religious establishment; this is the Jesus that showed no fear in the midst of the storm; this is the Jesus that made the lame to walk and the blind to see; this is the Jesus that raised the dead to life. This was the Jesus that seemed absolutely unmovable, unflappable. So all of a sudden He's coming unraveled in the garden—what's going on here?" And the answer is: "Jesus wasn't about to be a Christian martyr; He was about to become *the Savior of the world!"* The real agony of the cross was not the physical pain, as horrific as that was. It was the fact that a Holy God would take upon Himself the sins of the world. One New Testament writer says that Jesus would actually *become sin* for us. It's hard for us to process that because we're sinners; we live in the midst of sin all the time. We can't really comprehend what this is like for a God who is perfect in His holiness, who is holy, who is so righteous that He can't even dwell in the presence of sin. That's been the problem from the beginning: that God simply cannot dwell in the presence of sin. That's what separates us from God—a God so right and a God so holy that He would take upon Himself sin was absolutely unimaginable.

In the garden Jesus refers to the cup. *Is it possible that this cup might pass by me?* The cup is Old Testament prophetic language for the wrath of God—the wrath of God that must be poured out on sin because of God's justice. When Jesus looked into that cup, what He saw was the wrath of God, the condemnation of God that would be poured out on Him and, in His agony he asked, "Is there any other way?"

Think of it this way: it's hard to get our minds around how intense this really was. But the Bible is very clear: apart from Jesus and His offer of salvation, I have no hope as a sinner to have a relationship with a Holy God. God is very clear that He would be perfectly just for me to be separated from His presence forever. So imagine that judgment, that condemnation, that I would be separated from the presence of God forever. Imagine the intensity of that and try to capture an eternity's worth of judgment and reduce it to three hours in time and imagine the intensity of those three hours, just for me. Now imagine that for every single person in this auditorium. Now imagine that for every single person on the face of the planet and now imagine that for every single person who has ever drawn breath! The intensity of all of that was reduced down to three hours of unimaginable horror on the cross.

Jesus looks into that cup and sees what's coming and asks the Father, "Is there any other way that we can do this?" This is a very important question because so many people today believe that all religions ultimately lead to God—all roads lead to God— there are lots of different ways to God. But this is exactly the question that Jesus was asking the Father, "Is there any other way?" Can we do this any other way...and the fact that He went to the cross was the answer of the Father. There simply is no other way. Jesus must drink of the cup of God's wrath. Verse 40:

> **And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and He said to Peter...**
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> [Peter specifically because, in verses 33 and 35, Peter was the one that said, "Lord, no matter what, I'll stand with you. I'll be courageous. If necessary, I will die with you." And Jesus says, "That's all well and good, but you can't even stay awake for me in my hour of need."]
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> **"So, you *men* could not keep watch with Me for one hour? Keep watching and praying, that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."** (vs. 40-41)

Jesus knows they care; Jesus knows they want to but they're exhausted and they just can't stay awake. Verse 42:

> **And He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done."**

Clearly the Father had answered His prayer—there was no other way. He would have to drink of the cup and it was sheer agony! I assure you the agony was both with the Father and with the Son as they both contemplated what was to come.

It's interesting to think about, in the first garden paradise was lost because Adam and Eve said to God, "Not Your will, but my will be done." Paradise would be regained because Jesus would say to God, "Not My will but Your will be done." It was the only hope we have.

> **Again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. And He left them again, and He went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more. Then He came to the disciples, and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!"** (Vs. 43-46)

Three agonizing prayers in the garden, as God the Son and God the Father looked at what was to come and agonized over the moment. Luke tells us, in this third round Jesus sweat drops of blood in His agony. Luke tells us that God actually sent an angel to be Jesus' strength, to be His comfort, to be there with Him. If His friends are going to sleep through it, then the Father would send an angel to be there with Him as He contemplated the final moments before His arrest. Jesus would be arrested; He would be betrayed by His own friend, Judas. Throughout the night He would be condemned in a mock trial. He would be tortured and He would be executed.

Each of the Gospel writers selectively choose the sayings of Jesus on the cross that each writer wants to record. Interestingly enough, Matthew chooses only one. We find it in chapter 27. We pick it up in verse 45.

> **Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour.**

[Twelve noon to three in the afternoon.]
About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?" that is, "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?"

An unimaginable moment! Never in eternity had there ever been a moment like this and never in eternity will there ever be a moment like this. In some way, beyond our ability to understand or explain, there was some sort of separation between God the Father and God the Son in this three hour period of absolute, sheer horror. And in that moment the Son cries out to the Father, "**Why have You forsaken me?**" As if all creation was mourning from noon till three, all the earth became dark. I have no doubt that the angels in the heavens were silent, stunned at what was happening. I have no doubt that the Father agonized as the Son agonized at this horrific event.

It is not possible to fully understand what was going on here. People can be very critical of what was happening with Jesus on the cross because we don't really understand exactly how all this works. There's always a mystery to God. I can explain the details of the atonement but there's still a mystery of it that we cannot fully understand. I don't get completely how this works. I only know that God was very clear: that this is the only way. The agony of Jesus in the garden was to ask the question, "Is there any other way to do this?" God the Father and God the Son were not getting their religious kicks out of this. This was not some weird game that God was playing. This was not just God's way of manipulating the situation. This was sheer agony for both the Father and the Son with the clear question, "Is there any other way to do this? Does it have to be this way?" And the answer was, "It has to be this way. There simply is no other way."

I suppose one could criticize if God somehow was torturing other people, but the fact of the matter is: God the Father and God the Son got together and said, "We will do this. We will be the sin bearers; we will take the punishment of sin. We will pour out the Father's wrath on the Son in order to pay this debt. We will do it ourselves so we can offer sinful people salvation as a gift!" When you understand it that way, what is there to criticize? What is there to criticize, that God Himself, motivated by His love would say, "I so long to know you; I so long to reconcile with you; I so long to walk with you in a garden paradise that I'm willing to become the sin bearer. I'm willing to hang on the cross; I'm willing to take the wrath; I'm willing to take the condemnation so I can offer you salvation freely as a gift." Help me understand—what is there to criticize in that? How could the message be any better than that? God freely offers His salvation.

One would have to imagine those three hours of darkness were the three hours when Jesus became sin—absolute horror, sheer agony on the cross. John would tell us that the last words out of the mouth of Jesus was the Greek word *tetelestai*. It's a banking term: *It is finished!* In banking terms—*paid in full*! Jesus finished the payment on the cross—mission accomplished! God had fulfilled the promise He had made in the garden—that He would do what is necessary to make it possible for sinful men and women to experience life out of death, to have their sins forgiven, to have their shame covered and enter into a relationship with a Holy God now and forever. Jesus was not hanging on that cross because of His own sin. It was not because of some strange religious game they were playing. He hung on the cross because of you! And because of me! He looked at you and said, "I want to be with you forever. I want to provide forgiveness for your sin; I want to take away the shame and guilt. I want to walk with you in paradise again—so much so I'll do everything. All you have to do is receive my gift."

Jesus finished the job on the cross. But thankfully the story doesn't end there. The first garden was paradise, but it was paradise lost. The second garden was sheer agony, but what would happen in

the next garden would change the world forever! What would happen in the next garden would be the signature event of the Christian faith. What would happen in the next garden is the reason we gather this morning. It's the reason we have hope for life after death. It's what we've come to celebrate. The first garden was paradise—but paradise lost. The second garden was sheer agony over what was to come. The third garden was sheer ecstasy! So, church, hang on to your chairs! We're about to have ourselves a garden party!

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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