

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Second Sunday In Lent, February 25, 2024

✠ ✠ ✠

(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 342, 142:1, 159, 516, 144:5.

Lessons: Isaiah 52:13-53:12, Hebrews 2, verse 9, Mark 14:32-42.,

Sermon Text: Matthew 26:30 and 36-46.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

After the institution of the Lord's Supper on the evening we call Maundy Thursday, Jesus led his disciples out to the Mount of Olives, which is just to the east of Jerusalem and east of the hill on which the temple stood. He went to an area called Gethsemane, a name which signifies "valley of the oil-press", which was a place with a garden of olive-trees.

He went there to pray. And we learn from Scripture that prayer is an act of worship in which we speak to God from our hearts, a heart-to-heart talk with God.

But this wasn't just some regular, ordinary prayer. Today we see

JESUS AND THE AGONY OF HIS PRAYERS

- 1. Jesus was even now suffering, and**
- 2. He talked to his heavenly Father in prayer.**

For many of us, prayer can easily become sort of a superficial repetition of words. Sometimes our heart isn't in it when we say the words. Sometimes we just say the words and our mind wanders when we hear someone else leading a prayer, as in our worship services.

Today we see someone praying most earnestly. After all, his life is on the line. Why shouldn't he pray as if his life depended on it?

Jesus had just celebrated the Passover and instituted the Sacrament of the Altar, the Lord's Supper, given for the strengthening of the faith of Christians.

But he himself now needed strengthening, and he *"went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.'*

He then prayed most earnestly.

It is impossible for us to imagine such a prayer. This is a prayer of a man who knows he is going to die soon, and he knows he is going to die a most agonizing death. He knows that he will suffer terribly before he dies.

Artists have often pictured Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane as very peaceful and serene, with a relaxed, calm look on his face. But it wasn't like that at all.

As the Son of God, Jesus knew the Father's plan well. But here in the garden, we see the humanity of Jesus struggling against something so horrifying that we cannot imagine it. Mark tells us *"He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,' he said to them. 'Stay here and keep watch.'"* (Mark 14:33-34, NIV84)

Of course, this isn't the first time in his life that he was troubled and sorrowful. For example, he was troubled over the impenitence of the people of Jerusalem. But this was worse, more difficult than anything he had faced in his life on earth.

We must remember that death was completely foreign to God. For the sinless Jesus, the true Son of God, death was most unnatural.

We must also remember that Jesus, true Son of God, is also fully human. He had a human soul, and as a human he would be terrified, not just of death, but of the death that would pay for all the sins of all mankind.

Human flesh does not easily submit to such pain as Jesus would endure, especially if there's a choice. We don't want to endure pain. Nor did Jesus. He didn't look forward to being pierced with a thorny crown and having nails pounded through his hands and feet. His body did not welcome the idea of having the skin ripped from his back with a bloody scourge. He did not look forward to being hung on the cross. But Jesus knew it must take place. This was God's plan. It had always been God's plan from eternity.

Jesus was now face to face with the most awful struggle, a conflict so terrible that we have no adequate conception of it. Not even the men closest to him could share in the struggle, the fight against Satan and death which he was going to endure.

We can also see another reason why his soul was overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death in the garden that night. It's something that will be hard for us to understand. We can understand pain and praying for relief from pain. We can empathize with Jesus when he recoils from the thought of enduring such pain. But there is something else about what Jesus would suffer that is beyond us. Can you imagine how frightening and horrifying it must have been for the Holy One of God, the perfectly innocent Son of God, to feel the shame and guilt of every human's sin? It's hard to imagine that. We've lived with sin and guilt and shame all our lives. Jesus had no sin and guilt and shame of his own. But he knew that he must bear the guilt and the punishment for the sins of the world. He did it because that was God's plan. He did it because he loves us.

We must remember and find comfort that Jesus' death was a vicarious death. He died as our substitute. He was carrying to the cross the load of all the sins of all mankind, and that means all the load of your sins.

Three times he went to pray by himself.

His disciples, and even Peter, James and John, whom he took with him while he left the rest of the men to go to a more private place to pray, probably didn't realize how troubled Jesus was. These are the same three men who witnessed his transfiguration, when Moses and Elijah appeared to them and the voice of the Father was heard to strengthen Jesus for the suffering to come. Now he wants these men to be near him to watch and pray for him.

Before the first time he asks these three men, whom we consider his closest disciples, ***"Stay here and keep watch with me."*** But what did they do? They fell asleep. He asks for help and support, but they weren't there to help him. God always gives help and support, but men don't.

He asked them to keep watch but they didn't. After the first time he went to pray alone ***"he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. 'Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?' he asked Peter. 'Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.'"***

We know how weak our flesh can be. We are stumbling into sin all the time. We approach God in our morning prayers, and before we have prayed all that needs to be prayed, we may have lost our train of thought. We start thinking about what we're going to do that day. We sit down with our families to eat, and before the words of thanksgiving can be said, we may have already started to think about something else.

How can people do this? How can we pray words with our mouths and be thinking other thoughts at the same time? It's like Jesus said, ***"The flesh is weak."*** It's weak when we want to stay home instead of getting dressed up to go to a worship service. It's weak when we, out of laziness, want to just watch the worship service our church offers for those for whom it is impossible to worship in person on our smart phones or our computers or our television. It's weak when we want to get up for church on Sunday morning but choose a few hours of sleep instead of hearing God's Word. It's weak when we let our children watch a few more minutes of TV instead of reading them Bible stories before they go to bed. It's weak when we cannot find a way to stop our mouths from using the name of God to curse our neighbors, our friends, our families, or anything that gets in our way. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

We must also realize that the devil was now given permission to enter into mortal combat with Jesus. Satan knew that Jesus came to destroy his power. When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness he tried to offer Jesus an easier path than the one that the Word of God tells us Jesus must take. Now, as one writer said, Satan tries to frighten Jesus away from the path God had laid out for him by picturing the horrors Jesus was yet to face.

Later in this Garden of Gethsemane, he told the men who came to capture him **“this is your hour—when darkness reigns.”** (Luke 22:53, NIV84)

In his prayers, Jesus asks if it is possible that he be delivered from the suffering he must face. **“He went away a second time and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.’”** He is not anxious to go and suffer. He knows that the cup of suffering is filled to the brim and he must drink all of it. Mark gives us more details when he puts it this way: **“‘Abba, Father,’ he said, ‘everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.’”** (Mark 14:36, NIV84)

He asks his heavenly Father if there might be another way the goal and mission and purpose of his suffering and death could be accomplished. But he wasn’t delivered from his suffering. He suffered so that we can be delivered from eternal suffering. He concludes with this prayer **“your will be done”**. He will not oppose the will of his heavenly Father. He doesn’t refuse to take the path laid out for him from eternity. Think of what we pray when we ask in the Lord’s Prayer **“Thy will be done”**.

“When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

The spirit, the new man, is willing but the flesh, the old man, the sinful flesh is weak. It is only through watchfulness and prayer that the new man may overcome the flesh.

Luke gives us this picture of the agony. **“An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.”** (Luke 22:43–44, NIV84) That an angel appeared to strengthen him shows that his heavenly father had not at this time abandoned him. Then we have a remarkable picture of his sweat, like drops of blood, falling to the ground. Look at the terrible stress he is suffering!

He is suffering, and his disciples are sleeping! But the worst is yet to come.

“Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, ‘Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!’” (Matthew 26:45–46, NIV84)

What a terrible, terrifying picture of his agony in the garden of Gethsemane.

But in this we can find joy, that Jesus did this for you. He willingly suffered so that you can be free from the eternal suffering in hell! That’s a picture that is easy to forget if we look only at the sufferings and death of Jesus. We must be assured that after he suffers, is crucified and dies, he will rise again on the third day so that we, too, might rise to eternal life in heaven through faith in what he accomplished for us! Lord, give us such hope each day! Amen.