

“GETHSEMANE”

Scripture: Matthew 26:36-46

March 13, 2005

Rev. John W. Fowler

I wanted to share with you passages of scripture that I believe are so crucial to preparing ourselves to celebrate the Resurrection on Easter Sunday, and that is Jesus struggling in prayer with the temptation to avoid the cross in the Garden of Gethsemane. In chapter 26, beginning with verse 36, it says:

36 Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." 37 He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. 38 Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

39 Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

40 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. 41 "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

42 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."

43 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. 44 So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

45 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. 46 Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

The disciples were surprised, left and right, in the Upper Room that night. First of all, Jesus, well, he didn't just surprise, but shocked them by getting up and washing the feet of the disciples and telling them that I am giving you an example. They weren't used to a Master washing the feet of disciples. And then He began to talk to them about leaving them, but he was going to send them a Comforter, a Counselor. "Why are you leaving? You are only thirty-three years old. Why would you be leaving us? Why talk of that?"

And then when He celebrated the Passover He began to speak about a new covenant "poured out with my blood shed for you." And again, "What is He talking about?" But they were especially surprised when He talked about that, "one of you tonight will betray me."

"No, surely not I Lord, not I Lord." Peter said, "Lord, I would die for you."

"Peter, Satan has demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat, but I pray for you that you might not enter into temptation."

Judas would go forth and betray Him. So Jesus went into the garden. He took three of His clos-

est disciples, Peter, James and John, to come and pray with Him so that He would be strengthened; he would receive the courage to not enter into the temptation to avoid the cross of Jesus Christ.

The temptation is still with us today. It is always a temptation for a Christian to take the short-cut, the easy way, to not be criticized, to not rock the boat, to not do something that is painful, to take the road *most* traveled instead of the road less traveled.

But the way lives are changed today though, are when Christians are willing to take up their cross. In fact, in realizing that it is a privilege, it is an honor, whatever price that Christ asks us to pay for Him when we consider what He has done for us.

How did Jesus resist this temptation to avoid the cross? Well, first of all, when He went into the garden, He prayed a prayer of petition. Mind you, Jesus is not real keen about what is coming up. It says in verse 39:

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. . ." What cup? This cup of suffering. I mean, no one wants a mob to come and arrest them, to beat them, to torture them, and no one wants to be crucified. He does not have a martyr's complex, but He realizes that there have been some points where they have come to arrest Him before, but now the time has come. He is not going to hide, but He is praying, "If it is possible let this cup pass me, Lord. Nevertheless, not my will but Thy will be done."

The Apostle Paul knew about this. We don't know what it was, that in his missionary work, that he had a thorn in the flesh and he prayed three times for the Lord to remove it because — the same way I do when I am in pain or suffering: "Lord, I want it gone. I want the problem gone. I want the pain to be gone."

But the answer to prayer for Paul was: My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness. And you know, there is a peace that comes with that. When we are going through a painful situation, a painful time, and even if God is not, at this point, going to take it away, when He promises, I am going to give you the grace to deal with it, then you know that I am not in this by myself. God is with me and He is going to help me through this time because we know His grace is amazing.

When temptations come our way, Rick Warren, in his excellent book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, gives us four D's in the way it normally comes about when we are tempted to avoid the cross. First of all, when Satan is involved with that, there is a *desire* that he will come at us. It may be a good desire but he will thwart it. And then, with Adam and Eve, he showed it, enticed Eve with the fruit. And then there is the *doubt*. Did God really say that it is not good for you? *Deception*. She took of it and then here comes Adam taking of it. And of course he says when he was confronted with it, "It was that woman you gave me." Men do that; they will blame someone else for their sins — or their wives. Of course, most ladies, if you are married, you know that. But then *disobedience* comes in when they finally enter in and yield to the temptation.

But what is good news about the Garden of Gethsemane? When we pray, God gives us the power of His

Spirit to resist and not to enter in and not to avoid those things which are unpleasant, not to avoid the pain, and we hang in there.

In *Experiencing God*, Henry Blackaby talks about a crisis of belief. When God extends the call to Moses, you know, “I heard the cries of the Children of Israel. Go, I want to send you to set them free.” That is a crisis of belief of Moses. He thought, I’ve got a good job here as a shepherd; I’ve got family; I’ve got security; I’m comfortable. And that call to go back to Egypt was *way* out of his comfort zone.

And so he began: “Well, I don’t speak well.”

And so He said, “I’ll get Aaron to help you.” But you can see the Lord is starting to get a little testy with him. “I’ve given you this honor, this privilege; I want to use you, Moses, to go back.”

It is a crisis of belief when it is very obvious God wants to use us to reach someone else, but we kind of, — “Lord, it’s different. That will change my schedule. I don’t know how it is going to turn out. I don’t know what other people are going to think.”

It’s a crisis of belief because the crisis is that have got to have to make a decision: Are we going to do what God wants or are we not?

Sometimes this crisis is involved in a call to missions. You know in every community I have been in it seems like God has always wanted me to give a mission offering to something. The past six months has been to help with the homeless shelter. And you know, sometimes, you can tell, there is a temptation to, when you go to the meetings or things are not going well, or the first week, no one showed up, if that temptation comes in like: I want to quit; I just want to go on and do the things I want to do. But you know, yesterday I went out there and there are four people that would be without a home if they weren’t out there right now.

And oftentimes, what you do when you are praying this prayer of petition, you say, “Lord, I want this cup of suffering to pass. Nevertheless it’s not my will, but that Thy will be done. When you pray this prayer of petition you are opening yourself up to scorn. You are being honest, but you are praying for His will to be done. Jesus prayed a prayer of petition.

And of course He went back and they were sleeping. You would think after three years with Jesus they would learn how to pray for an hour, but it is late at night and, you know how it is if it is late at night or you are in the sanctuary and it is warm and you are already thinking about lunch or whatever, you know you get a little heavy with the eyes, but they fell asleep and Jesus said, “Watch and pray. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.”

And He goes away a second time and this time you can tell He has received more of a peace, which is a true sign that you are in the will of God. There is a peace that comes, and now prayer is more of a prayer of surrender. The first prayer is more of a prayer of petition, but this one is a prayer of surrender. And in verse 42, He prayed:

"My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

When this temptation comes to us to avoid the Cross, we stand upon the promises of God. First Corinthians, chapter 10, verse 13 says it this way.

No temptation has overtaken you that is uncommon to man. God is faithful and just and will not allow you to be tempted beyond your strength but with the temptation will provide a way of escape so that you may be able to endure.

And then Isaiah says it this way: As we pray, God begins to give us the strength, when Isaiah promised that *they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint.*

When we make that prayer of surrender, we are available. We are letting the Lord know that we are available to be used by Him in whatever way He would like us to be used.

His name was Dietrich Bonhoeffer and he is known for his writings. Really a spiritual classic is *The Cost of Discipleship*. But those books and those writings of his are backed up by a life that embodies what I am speaking about today. He was a Lutheran pastor, a very gifted theologian. He was over in our country (he grew up in Germany) teaching at Union Theological Seminary. He had to make a decision about, well, is he going to stay here during World War II and train young pastors going into the ministry, or is he going to go back to Germany — and suffer? His decision was, I cannot participate in the rebuilding of Germany if I don't go there and suffer with them. Well, he went back and was very involved in the resistance movement to Hitler. He was arrested. He was put in prison. You read accounts of people that knew him in prison; he lived a very authentic Christian life. He was executed days before that prison was liberated, but today lives are changed because his whole concept of *costly grace* was lived out by his life. He is a shining example of what happens in our lives when we change, when we are willing to make that choice. It is a choice that we make when we are willing to surrender our lives to Christ.

Sometimes there is a surrender that comes — the place that you especially want to live your Christianity out is in your family. Oftentimes God is calling us to sacrificial Christianity in our family. I think of over the years when I have watched people care for loved ones. You care for them because you love them, but let's face it: sometimes it's really hard. I think back, now that I actually miss it, but for three years, you know my brother and sister live in Charlotte, my mother's failing health, they were there most of the time, but my younger brother and I, what we would do is alternate weekends, coming to see her. I would love to say that I just always looked forward to getting in the car and going to Charlotte and going down there and visiting in the nursing home but, you've been there, and you know that sometimes, I really didn't look forward to it. You know, it's hard to see someone you love going down. It just is. And sometimes there is always the temptation just to avoid it and those days, I would, "Oh, gosh. Do I have time to go?"

And I would think, well, my mother will be understanding, but I always think about when I get to Heaven, I don't want to explain to my father why I was too busy to go see his wife, and so, I'd get in the car and I'd go. And believe me, I know I'd hear about that, and so I would go. But one of the great gifts that God gave to me, and I think back, you know, and of course, whenever I would leave I was, "I'm so glad I went." And I look back on those three years and, you know, I'm just really glad, because I know the first year I was here I was really convicted that, you know, I'm far too busy with this church. And I love this church but I realize, you know — and that was before she had her accident — and so I'm glad I don't have to look

back and think, well, I have a lot of regrets that I didn't go.

But you know that when you consider all the times she could have gone home to be with the Lord though, the day that she died, my brother from out of town had been there that prior week. She had seen my brother and sister, and really almost had died during the night but she rallied a little bit, so when I got there at my normal time I could tell she wasn't doing well but she was stable. But then, about fifteen minutes after I got there, you could tell that she was getting worse and they called the rest of the family to come back but I got to be there when she passed away and it's pretty..... (tape change) . . . He'll give you the grace; He'll give you the strength. And I think one of the ways it keeps you going, too: you remember what people have done for you in your life. It's very different.

Jesus was disappointed his disciples were sleeping but He prayed again the third time the prayer of surrender and this time as He had a peace that He was in the will of God, He had the courage to meet those that would betray Him. They came and arrested Him and Peter got some courage; it wasn't the right kind of courage but he cut off the ear of Malchus. And Jesus touched Malchus' ear and restored it. Peter didn't know what to think about that and the rest of them didn't know what to think about that. He went to a trial, falsely accused. He was beaten; He was scourged. It was a savage beating. He suffered greatly. When I think of the movie, *The Passion*, and I think over the twenty-five years that I preached about Holy Week and the Passion, probably that beating you see is pretty accurate; it was pretty savage. In fact, it was called the near death.

When Jesus was taken before Pilate, Pilate tried to give Him an out: "Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" "We want Barabbas." Jesus was led out to be crucified and He died that death. But there is a reason He went through with that. Was it fulfillment of Old Testament prophesy? Oh, a lot of them. Was it to pay for our sins? Oh yes. But more than anything it was out of His incredible love for you and me that He gave His life upon the cross. That's what the cross is all about. In Hebrews it says it this way:

12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Jesus agreed to go to the cross and went to the cross courageously, bravely, because He knew that through His death upon the cross, once and for all there would be forgiveness of sins through this sacrifice. He knew that through His death upon the cross, He believed that He would rise from the dead, and once and for all, death would be defeated. It was because He was willing to not take this temptation to avoid the cross that the world has never been the same. Jesus had prayed that you may not enter into temptation. Let us pray.

O Lord, today we thank You for Gethsemane. We thank you for Your courageous example. Lord, we are comforted to know that You too struggled. You too went through anguish as You struggled through a very difficult time. But, Lord, we thank you for Your example, and as You

prayed, You received the courage from Your Father to take up Your cross and follow Him. Lord, thank you today for this amazing love and this amazing grace. We pray you would help us to have the strength to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow You as well. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.