

## Prayer

Lord God Almighty, we offer ourselves to You today because You alone can make sense of what lies before us. We can never fully understand the many things that are happening around us, and we can never fully appreciate the implications of all we say and do. You, however, are capable of knitting everything together in the integrated patchwork of Your perfect plan. Guide us, we pray, and may we trust You, because You know best. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Before you eat today, give thanks for your food and offer it to God in a prayer of dedication and blessing.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for the witness of the church** *Pray for all who are seeking new ways to express their faith. May they be faithful to the 'Body of Christ'.*
- *Pray for the USA in the aftermath of passing healthcare legislation*
- *Give thanks to God for the protection of law enforcement agencies*

## Meditation

Come, my Saviour, Jesus Christ,  
For after all my wandering and searching  
I need the grace of love's redeeming liberty.

If I am lost, then find me;  
If I am stubborn, then move me;  
If I am resistant, then melt me.

If I am weary, then give me rest;  
If I am troubled, then soothe me;  
If I am sick, then heal me.

If I am ready, then take me;  
If I am willing, then lead me;  
If I am able, then empower me.

Come, my Saviour, Jesus Christ,  
For if I live by faith and seek the heart of God  
I will truly find my bonds released, and be set free.

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## Bible passage - Matthew 26:36-46

<sup>36</sup> Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to them, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' <sup>37</sup> He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and became upset and distressed. <sup>38</sup> Then he said to them, 'I am overcome with sorrow, even to the point of death; stay here, and keep alert with me.' <sup>39</sup> Going a little farther, he fell face down on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup be taken from me; yet let it not be by my will, but yours.' <sup>40</sup> Then he returned to the disciples and found them sleeping. He said to Peter, 'Why, could you not stay awake with me one hour? <sup>41</sup> Watch and pray that you may not be tested; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.'

<sup>42</sup> He went away for the second time and prayed, 'My Father, if this cannot happen unless I drink the cup, then may your will be done.' <sup>43</sup> He came and found them sleeping again, because their eyes were heavy. <sup>44</sup> So he left them again, and went away to pray for the third time, saying the same thing. <sup>45</sup> Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, 'Are you

still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is to be handed over to sinners. <sup>46</sup>Get up and let us go. Look, my betrayer is here!’

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## Bible Study

### Review

There is something profoundly holy about this passage of scripture, as it describes Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. For a few more hours before His death and crucifixion, Jesus was a free man, and in these extraordinary moments, the record of Matthew enables us to see Jesus’ humanity and divinity side by side in a turmoil of agony. Jesus the man struggled with the sorrow of death (26:37-39, 42), and Jesus the divine Son of Man was able to remain in control, instructing the disciples and chiding them (26:36,40,41,44-46). Jesus the man wanted to share these few defining moments of His ministry with His friends, the inner circle of the disciples, and Jesus the divine Son of Man needed to be with His Father in prayer, ultimately submitting to His will.

Remarkably, here in Gethsemane, we seem to see a side of Jesus we have not seen before. The very fact that Jesus questions what is happening to Him is extraordinary, for in the rest of the Gospel, He has always been in control of events. Where He previously spoke forcefully and openly about the meaning of His death (16:21,24f. etc.), He now sounds hesitant before the Father; wondering whether it can possibly be God’s will for Him to die (26:39,42). Yet however poignant the moment, it soon passes and Jesus’ divinity is shown once again in His continued command of the situation even up to the end. This is shown both in His ability to accept the will of the Father (26:42), and also in His guidance of the disciples, who were clearly unable to handle the situation.

Almost every feature of this story has been poured over in great detail; for example, the vulnerability of Jesus, the inability of the disciples to handle the situation, Jesus’ rebuke of the disciples, the words of the prayers said by Jesus, and the threefold pattern of events. Surely its truths are to be found not so much in its details but in the overall theme and pattern of what happened. In these few moments, Jesus came to the point of accepting God’s will. Jesus had spoken about coming to Jerusalem to be killed on many occasions, and He clearly believed that the dead would be raised (10:8), but it is one thing to speak about these things, and another to give them full ascent and accept them as God’s will. The incident also tells us that Jesus was no puppet Messiah. He did not follow the Lord’s will as if walking on a cloud of untroubled perfection. Sin was not in Him, but He certainly knew what it was to be troubled in soul and spirit, and He knew what it meant to seek the truth, find it, and accept it, however difficult. For all of this, we thank God.

Whilst the extraordinary nature of this episode in Jesus’ life has long been accepted in the church, some have now questioned whether it really happened. It has been suggested that the disciples could not have recalled something that happened whilst they were asleep, but gives no other explanation of this report in Matthew. The answer to this must surely be that the evangelists report Jesus spending time with the disciples after the resurrection, teaching them about everything that had happened (e.g. Luke 24:13ff, 44) and it is not unreasonable to suppose that they might have poured over these traumatic moments before Jesus’ death. It is also quite possible that only brief episodes of the hours spent in the garden are reported because they are exactly what the tired disciples recalled from the few moment when they were barely awake. However this passage has come to us, this glimpse of Jesus’ prayers is sufficient for us to grasp the significance of what happened, we need no more.

In addition to revealing Jesus’ agony in His final hours, this passage prepares us for the weakness and failure of the disciples. Despite Jesus’ express need of them in these critical moments, they are unable to support Him. As we will see in coming studies, when the betrayal finally happens, they melt away in abject failure.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The meaning of Gethsemane and the place of this incident within Scripture
- The three prayers of Jesus
- The tiredness of the disciples

### Going Deeper

#### ***The meaning of Gethsemane and the place of this incident in Scripture***

The name 'Gethsemane' means, in Hebrew 'oil press'. It was a facility essential to the production of olive oil, situated naturally, near the Mount of Olives. It does appear this was a rendezvous used by Jesus and the disciples in the few days in which He lived near Jerusalem in Bethany, regularly going to the Temple to teach and contend with the authorities. Clearly, Judas was aware of it as such when he later appeared on the scene to betray Jesus (26:47). Jesus, however, was obviously aware that this was all about to happen. He could have chosen to go somewhere else, but for Him, there was no avoiding the purposes and will of His Father. He had taught the disciples frequently that he was going to die, and therefore to walk away from all that was happening would have been utterly inconceivable.

Jesus told the main group of the disciples to wait to one side whilst he took his three closest disciples with Him to pray; Peter, James and John, the same trio who had been up the mountain with Jesus to see him transfigured in the presence of Moses and Elijah, and of God Himself (17:1ff). These same three had spoken of their willingness to share Jesus' ultimate destiny (20:22, 26:35), and Jesus may have brought them as a challenge to fulfil their words. Some might question how Jesus could forgive those who failed Him in His darkest hour of deepest need? Yet it remains a fact that Jesus did just that (John 21:15ff), offering forgiveness after the resurrection, as one victorious over death and sin.

It is possible that Matthew may have wished us to see a connection between this incident and the story of Abraham taking his son Isaac for sacrifice (Genesis 22). There is evidence that in Jesus' day there was considerable rabbinic interest in the story, the 'Akedah Isaac' (transliterated from Hebrew). In that story, Abraham told his servants to stay at a distance (22:3) and then went up the mountain with Isaac in order to sacrifice him. Abraham's faith was tested to the limit as God finally provided a ram to sacrifice instead of his son Isaac, the child of God's promise. It may be that Matthew wanted us to see this connection in order to gain a greater understanding of God's provision of salvation within the drama of the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is certainly worth re-reading the Abraham story from Genesis in order to better understand this spiritually powerful event.

### ***The three prayers of Jesus***

As Jesus came to pray, He spoke to the disciples 'I am overcome with sorrow ...' (v38). These are words which are very similar to Psalm 42:4,5 and 45:5; both psalms reflecting the anguish and suffering of a righteous man who nevertheless knew that the Lord would vindicate Him. These psalms were well known, and their use showed that Jesus was holding on to the resurrection hope of salvation and deliverance so often implicit in these and many other psalms which express sorrow or lament.

Then something remarkable occurred. So often in Jesus' ministry, people had fallen down on their knees in front of Him in an attitude of worship; the Bible has a special word for this, which is 'proskuneo'. Now, it is used of Jesus, as in dramatic worship and obeisance before His Father, Jesus fell down in worship ('proskuneo'), not on His knees, but upon 'his face', which meant that He lay flat on the ground, prostrate. Too many of us have been influenced by the Victorian pictures of Jesus kneeling in the Garden of Gethsemane and wringing His hands in prayer as a light from heaven illuminates the sweat on His brow as like 'drops of blood' (Luke 22:44). No, here in Matthew's Gospel, He is laid out in abject submission to the Father. It was in this position he prayed His famous prayer.

Jesus prayed not one prayer but three. The first of these came in verse 39, in which Jesus appeared to show His more human nature, asking God if there was possibly another way in which His will might be achieved other than the 'cup' of suffering and death which He faced. The word 'cup' was usually used in the Old Testament to refer to something bad, a 'cup of wrath', for example (as in Psalm 11:6; 75:8; Isaiah 51:17 etc.) often reflected the judgement of God. The 'cup' also reminds us of the 'last supper', just celebrated, and in which the expected 'cup' of the judgement of God is wonderfully and powerfully transformed by Jesus into the cup of 'the covenant ... for the forgiveness of sins!' All of these powerful motifs represented the weight of what Jesus bore for us as He lay in anguish before His Father in the Garden.

The second prayer in verse 42 demonstrated significant change 'if this cannot happen unless I drink the cup, then may your will be done'. I have translated this verse in this way to highlight the change in Jesus' heart to accept the will of God. It is not fatalism, but the courage to face the hardest test, the ability to stand in the face of the fiercest enemy, and confidence in Almighty God that He is in charge despite everything.

The third time Jesus prayed, Matthew reported Jesus as saying the same prayer as before. Having anguish over everything and then accepted His Father's will, Jesus did not turn back. In a strange way, the prayer Jesus uttered closely reflected Jesus' own teaching in the well known 'Lord's prayer'; 'Your will be done ...' (6:10). At this most crucial of times, Jesus put into practice what He Himself preached.

### ***The tired disciples***

In the chapters of Matthew between the description of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the story of the 'Last Supper', Jesus had taught about the coming in glory of the Messiah (Himself) at the end of all time, when God alone would bring all things to their conclusion. The main message to the disciples was 'watch'

(24:36,42 etc), the same Greek word that meant 'keep awake' or 'stay alert'. Therefore, the same command Jesus gave to the disciples about being prepared for the coming of the End Times was also given to them as He prayed in this passage (verses 38 and 40). It is a command which is made to us as well!

I suspect that Jesus knew the disciples were failing Him, and He knew He was gradually being left on His own, which was the only way His Father's will could be done for the salvation of all humanity. However, out of faithfulness to the disciples, He did not give up on them, and in a way, neither did the disciples whilst Jesus prayed. They did fall asleep, but they stayed with Him and did not go away. There may have been disappointment in Jesus' words to the disciples as He chided them for falling asleep, but I doubt if there was a sense of irritation or anger even when He said 'why, could you not stay awake with me one hour?' (v40); the words are words of deep sadness.

Then, at the close of Jesus' last few moments of freedom, He rose to face the situation, being prayerfully prepared and now standing firm in the spiritual strength for which His prayers had prepared Him. It was now that the disciples' sleep found them out, for without the vigilance of prayer, they were unprepared for what would happen next (which we shall read tomorrow).

## Application

Jesus remained ready to do the Father's will as the tension of His final hours increased. It is hardly possible for any of us to enter into Jesus' experience at that time. We glimpse some of the emotions he must have felt as a man, and we can empathise with His feelings of deep sadness, even His desire that perhaps there might be another way. But the spiritual strength Jesus showed was a result of His divinity and closeness to the Father. Many people in this world have done heroic things and indeed died for others in extraordinary ways. However, no man or woman has ever faced complete worldly and spiritual rejection in the same way that Jesus did, whilst knowing that He was doing the Father's will.

Jesus' supreme task was to die without sin, not even the sin of bitterness at those who killed Him. His death would therefore rob the powers of death of their ultimate reward, for He could not be separated from the Father, even at death. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus would forge a pathway from this fallen world back to God, its Creator, irrespective of the power of death to thwart God's will. As a consequence, those who have faith in Jesus would, from that time onwards, be able to claim the same and escape the clutches of death and the horror of being separated from the Creator. Remember, He was prepared to do it all for you, for me, and for all humanity; because he loves us, no less. If you have not heard that, you have not heard the Gospel.

There is of course, no way that we can copy what Jesus did, or 'apply' what happened in Gethsemane to our own lives. We can of course submit to God's will, but we can never face the full force of evil's powers as Jesus did and stand firm. All we can do is wonder at what Jesus did for us and give glory to God for this. Sometimes we think that the application of scripture must always be some task or physical response to all we have learned and read. However, this passage teaches us that the best response we can give to what we have been taught is to give Him praise and honour in whatever way we feel is right and fitting.

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** *(for use in groups)*

1. Have you been led to bow down, perhaps even 'prostrate' before God, lying on the ground? What has this meant to you?
2. Does the father offer Jesus any answer to Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, or does Jesus have to endure His own equivalent of 'unanswered prayer'?
3. What does the story of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane teach you about the purposes of God and the work of Jesus?

### **Topics covered by this text**

- *Submission to the will of God*
- *Jesus' work of salvation for all humanity*
- *The importance of prayer*

## **Personal comments by author**

*It is not easy to respond to this reading today, and we may feel that there is little we can take from it. However, our Lord clearly values the faithful who wait on Him and do what He has commanded; this is what He asked of the disciples, and He asks it of us now. In the Garden, Jesus asked His disciples to persist in the midst of extreme circumstances and never give up doing what is right. Jesus asked the disciples to 'stay awake', but He calls us to do other things, and we need to be willing to get on with this and not go to sleep on the job.*

## **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *What is the hardest thing for you as a Christian? Only you can make this call, but it is worth making it and being clear. We cannot afford to hide the hardest calls; rather we need to openly accept that our hardest challenges are most likely to be our most fruitful work; this is a spiritual as well as a practical truth.*
- *Fast and pray for those who find it hard to keep up the pace of life and feel left out of what the church is doing. Pray that all God's people will be understanding of each other as we respond to the call of the Gospel.*

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## **Final Prayer**

Through love, Lord Jesus, You have given us the greatest of gifts, the redemption of our souls. From Your birth at Bethlehem to Your death on Calvary, Your life was lived for us so that we might receive this gift. How can we ever thank You, except by giving our lives for Your glory and for Your service. We give You all the glory and honour, Lord Jesus: AMEN

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