

Honest Prayers: Bringing Ourselves to God “Jesus in the Garden”

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What do you do when you see a task before you that you do not want to do? I'm not talking about something mundane like doing the dishes or taking out the trash. Not something merely annoying, but something you dread. It may seem unavoidable. You know it is going to hurt physically, emotionally. It seems beyond your strength. You may feel alone, abandoned, like no one understands or even could. You may feel like it is beyond your capacity to do it, deal with it. So, there's that, which is difficult enough, but ... What if it is a task that God has set before you?

Many of us have been there. You have probably heard that terrible cliché. "God won't give you more than you can handle." Well, that's just plain wrong. Throughout the Bible and throughout our lives, we do get more than we can handle. We might feel guilty about this, thinking that we *should* be able to handle it. Weakness is perceived as bad. It may be that we either tell ourselves or someone else effectively tells us to **get over it**. "Suck it up buttercup."

Have any of you felt this anytime over the past year? It wouldn't be surprising. We've had a lot thrown at us. Here's the thing. We do get more than we can handle ... on our own. God wants us to come to him, to lean on him, receive fresh strength when it is too much for us.

Today's prayer is a great example for us, Jesus in the garden on the night of his arrest. It is part of a longer passage that we normally read during Holy Week leading up to Easter. So much of the passage is important that we rarely have the opportunity to focus on Jesus' private prayer with God, the Father, that night.

This scene appears in all three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Today, we are landing in Luke 22:39-46. Jesus and the disciples have just left the Last Supper. Hear the word of the Lord.

39 Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. 40 On reaching the place, he said to them, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." 41 He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, 42 "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." 43 An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. 44 And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

45 When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow. 46 "Why are you sleeping?" he asked them. "Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation."

The word of life.

Thanks be to God!

One of the big questions about Jesus since the time of the Early Church has been, "Is Jesus God, or is he human?" The official answer is both. During his ministry, Jesus did things that only God can do: forgive sins, control the weather, do miracles that even resembled what God did for the Israelites during Exodus, like produce (or stretch) food out of nothing. Remember the feeding of the 5000 and the 4000. Raise people from the dead, which he did on more than one occasion. But, he was also very clearly human. He was born, for one. He had to eat and sleep, and of course, he died. The whole concept of being completely divine and completely

human is hard for anyone to get their mind around. That's the reason we have these creeds like the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed that emphasize the Jesus' divinity AND his humanness. To me this passage this passage highlights both, but with a special emphasis on his humanity.

Jesus knew what was coming, starting that night. He knew it in the way that God knew it. In his humanity he knew it would be terrible, and he didn't want to do it. He didn't seek his own death. He accepted it, but he didn't seek it. He knew the crisis he was facing, and he experience the physicality of fear. Have you experienced the fear of feeling your heart beat in your chest, of the sweaty palms, and sweat running down your face? If you see that from me today, it is the heat. But that happens when humans are under extreme stress. There's dispute whether Jesus' sweat was actually blood, which is a specific medical condition, or the regular kind, but still intense. Either way, it demonstrates the intensity of the torment he experienced.

When the Scriptures say and the church teaches that Jesus understands the kinds of things, the mental anguish, we experience, we can look at this moment. We can say yes. He understands. He even understands our desire to escape it because he wanted to as well.

And what does he do? First, Jesus advises the disciples to pray, and then he does so himself. He kneels. What he prays is very simple. "Father." He says, "Father." Not formal, but a form of address that shows the closeness that he feels. What he advises the disciples and us to call God, "Father." "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." (Luke 22:42) The cup? It could be the torment that Jesus would endure on our behalf. In the Older Testament, there is a cup of wrath that is God's just punishment for the sins of humanity. It could also be path he's on, also torment, also terrible. If there is some other way, please Father. But, if there is not, I will not try to escape it, I will continue.

The answer to Jesus' prayer was no. He would have to continue, all the way to the cross, but ... God sent him resources to help him. As we read about Jesus' temptation in the desert, again an angel was sent to strengthen him in his time of trial. God made it possible for Jesus to continue on this very difficult path.

The sad fact is that sometimes the answer to our prayers is no, but it is not because God doesn't care for us or want good for us. It is not arbitrary. There is a reason. In Jesus' case we know the reason, and we are thankful ... or ... we ... should ... be. But that is because we have the narrative of the Bible, and we are looking back. We know what happened. That's not so easy in our own lives. We may not understand until long after, or we may never know the reason - at least in this life because God's perspective is bigger.

So, this seemingly bad news for Jesus became good news for us. And of course, God **did** strengthen him to allow him to endure the human suffering. Not just at this moment, but throughout the rest of the episode. Think of the poise and coolness that Jesus showed in the face of his accusers, Pilate, Herod Antipas, all the way to his death. We can see this all as a result of this prayer. I am reminded of the words of the Apostle Paul in Philippians 4:7, "The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Jesus' prayer may be one of the hardest examples for us. It is not just because of the level of suffering that Jesus is enduring. In fact that is one of the comforting parts. In our deepest suffering, we can go to God. God will strengthen us, but the answer may be no. Can we accept that answer faithfully, like Jesus did?

Paul had this problem. He asked God to relieve his suffering, multiple times. He writes about it in 2 Corinthians 12:7b-9a:

7b Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

In his personal prayer book, Martin Luther writes, "Grant us grace to bear willingly all sorts of sickness, poverty, disgrace, suffering, and adversity, and to recognize that in this your divine will is crucifying our will" (Martin Luther, *Career of the Reformer* 3, *Luther's Works* 33 [St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1958], 33). Luther knew that learning to set aside our wants for the sake of God's will is crucial.

Our natural selves don't like that. We inherently resist it. We want to do what we want to do. We want to be in control of it. Even if we have to do something we don't like, we still want some say in the matter. It is hard to relinquish that control. It requires trust and faithfulness, especially when we can't see the bigger picture.

It helps if we are in regular dialogue with God. We talk to God through our prayers, our most honest and open prayers. Hearing God's voice through the Scriptures. Working our way to a place of understanding and trust. Looking to Jesus as our example of what mature faith looks like.

Our prayer journals can be a way of seeing how it moves and changes over time. I have encouraged you to try to keep a prayer journal over the length of this worship series if you don't already do this as a spiritual discipline. For some of you this is new, and yes, you're allowed to continue after next week. Whether you are doing this in a notebook, on index cards, or on your computer, it is a good discipline to try, even if it's only temporary.

You notice that Martin Luther had a prayer journal. I have a challenge for you and your prayer journals this week. Consider talking to Jesus about taking that giant leap of faith of putting your absolute faith in him. Trusting him even when it looks like it's something you don't want. Maybe even something you dread. As I was writing these words, God is speaking as much to me in this as he is to any one of you, maybe more. You can think that you are following Jesus, obeying all his commands, but then something comes at you that you realize you really don't want to do. And, you say really God? Really? Can you say, "Not my will, but yours be done." It's hard. Would you be willing to put it in writing? Even if it's in your private prayer journal that no one else will ever see.

Not everyone will feel like they're ready, but it is something that I encourage you to talk to Jesus about. Figure out where your hesitancy is. What's causing it? What would allow you to give up that control? Maybe, you're already there. How would you explain your ability to do this to someone else that is struggling?

How would you help them in their Honest Prayers to God?