

Despondency in Gethsemane

Matthew 26: 36-46

Dr Alex Tang
25th March 2010
Sunday Sermon
Bukit Panjang Methodist Church, Singapore

Sermon statement

Jesus' temptation in Gethsemane is the crisis point in salvation history and encourages us to watch and pray.

Text

MT 26:36 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."

MT 26:39 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."

MT 26:40 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."

MT 26:42 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."

MT 26:43 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.

MT 26:45 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!"

Introduction: Crisis points

There are many crisis points in the history of the world. The most recent is 9/11 when two planes flew into the Twin Towers in New York. It changed the domestic and foreign policy of the United States, the sole superpower in the world today. A decision was made somewhere by the Al Qaeda terrorists to go ahead with this attack on civilian target on US soil and this decision led to consequences that changed the modern world.

In our Christian tradition, another crisis point was when an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther decided to stand against the Church of Rome in by nailing his Ninety Five theses on a church door in Wittenberg on 31 October

1517 and started the Reformation movement and changed the Christian world.

Another crisis point is when God called to Moses from a burning bush in Genesis 3 and after many excuses, Moses decided to obey God to go to confront the Pharaoh and win freedom for the Hebrews people and changed the ancient religious world.

Each of these involved a point when the final decision was made and to carry out what was decided. It involves agonising decision making. Those making the decision know of the consequences of their decision and the price they have to pay in terms of their personal sacrifices. These among many other crisis points changed the world as we know it.

The most important crisis point in human history occurred in the Garden of Gethsemane in the text we shall study today. We are in the final weeks of Lent.

Exposition

MT 26:36 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."

- It is probably about midnight on the Thursday of Passover week in A.D. 33 (or 30).
- Jesus' three years ministry is coming to an end
- He has preached his last sermon and performed his last miracle.
- He has come to fulfill his mission – to be the last and ultimate Passover lamb, the perfect and only sacrifice for the sins of the world.

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."

- Jesus asks his disciples to keep watch with him. Watch is in the present tense.
- Why is Jesus sorrowful and troubled? Sorrowful and troubled is more than just depression or emotional turmoil that all of us experience. It means deeper than that and I suggest despondency. de-spond-en-cy [dih-spon-duhn-see] means state of being despondent; depression of spirits from loss of courage or hope; dejection. Isaiah describe the Messiah to be a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3). All his life Jesus must know about his mission, his destiny which to die for the sins of the world. Why this sudden change of

heart? Why this depression? Why this inner turmoil? Is Jesus afraid of death?

- I suggest that it is not physical death that Jesus is apprehensive about but that he is to become sin and be separated from the Father. To Jesus, that will be the most unbearable part of this stage of his mission.
- And I also suggest that Satan has also a role to play in his despondency or inner turmoil. Matthew detailed Jesus' temptations in the desert after fasting for forty days and nights (Matt. 4).

Matt. 4:11

^{MT 4:11} Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Luke added an additional comment (Luke 4:13)

^{LK 4:13} When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

You remember when it said after Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, "He withdrew from him until an opportune time." When do you think that was? Right now, I think. And not only did *he* draw near. John Piper suggests

I'll bet he gathered all of the most powerful members of his wicked army. You can be assured that the flaming darts that Paul mentions in Ephesians 6 were flying with volleys against the soul of the Son of God as he knelt there wrestling for his faithfulness.

^{MT 26:39} 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."

- My Father- Jesus usually uses the word Father or Abba. Here he uses a personal 'my Father'.
- 'this cup' is a metaphor for suffering and death that he was soon to face. It is also a metaphor. The imagery of 'the cup of God's wrath' is more powerful and more relevant in Jesus' case (Rev. 14:10; 16:19; Isa. 51: 17, 22).
- The struggle is between 'I will' and 'you [God's] will'. Jesus has a choice. He could stop the whole thing now and run away. If he leaves the garden now, Judas would not have found him to betray him. Then he can live the rest of his life away from Jerusalem and Galilee. No one will know him. I suggest this is his temptation by Satan at this moment. Satan was whispering. 'You don't have to do this. You don't

have to try to save these humans who are ungrateful, stiff necked and sinful. You don't have take on their sins and face your father's wrath on their behalf. Don't you have a right to yourself to live?'

- John Piper notes in a similar way

John 12:27 says "Now is my soul troubled. What shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, but for this purpose, I have come to this hour." Now I think that text tells us what the nature of the temptation was. Satan was firing volley after volley into the mind of Jesus Christ. And thoughts came into his mind from Satan, thoughts like, "This is a dead end street. Calvary is just a black hole. It's going to hurt like nothing has ever hurt any human being ever before, and these rascals aren't worth it, etc." These were coming out of Satan's wicked heart into the mind of the Son of God.

^{MT 26:40} 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."

- The disciples were sleeping. Sleeping is the metaphor of moral failure. Just before coming to the garden at the Passover meal (Last Supper) this all the disciples, not just Peter declared that they will never betray Jesus (Matt. 26: 31-35). Now they have betrayed Jesus because instead of watching, they are sleeping.
- Jesus shared about the temptation he is feeling. The spirit may be willing but the body is weak. His weak body is being tempted by Satan. Even at this moment, Jesus is still teaching his disciples. How do you resist temptations?
- Watch and pray! It is in the plural. The only effective weapon the disciples has against temptation is prayer.

^{MT 26:42} 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."

- Compare Jesus' first and second prayer:
"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."
"My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."
- There seems to be a change in Jesus' attitude. Where in the first prayer there may be a hint of bargaining, the second prayer is that of submission and obedience.

MT 26:43 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.

- The disciples were still sleeping. Maybe Jesus realize that humankind will never to able to get rid of their sinfulness without him. Note that Jesus have stopped rebuking them.
- Jesus affirmed his own decision to go through the ordeal. He prayed again the third time – similar to the three temptations in the desert.

"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

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

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

MT 26:45 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 are still 'sleeping and resting.' Jesus again did not rebuke them. John Calvin has this to say:

So far I have wasted my words on you, I shall cease urging you. But however much I may let you sleep, the enemy will not allow it you, but will force you to watch against your will (Institutes III, p.155)

- In the desert, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus uses Scripture to counter the temptations of Satan, in Gethsemane at the end of his ministry, Jesus uses his mind in decision making and prayer. Jesus made a conscious choice to be submissive to his father's will. There is not longer despondency and turmoil. The decision is made, Jesus is at peace and is ready to face what is to come.
- 'Rise, let us go.' The crisis is over and the final act will begin.

Lessons for us

1. **Spiritual warfare is still ongoing. There is an ongoing battle for our minds.**

a. **What we allow into our minds**

Paul writing to the Philippians highlights safeguards the battle for our minds. What is our antiviral screen? What is our firewall?

PHP 4:8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things.

b. **What we feed our minds**

A Cherokee Legend

An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy.

"It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil - he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego." He continued, "The other is good - he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you - and inside every other person, too."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

This story is also called "Grandfather Tells" which is also known as "The Wolves Within"

2. **We are to be watchful.**

a. **To be watchful means to know the will of God is.**

To be watchful means that we have to guard and protect our mind with the Word of God. We have to protect our souls by putting on the armor of God.

b. Not a sin to react emotionally

It is okay to feel depressed or sad when the situation warrens it or when you are stressed out. It is alright for Christians to be down. There is no teaching in the Bible that teaches Christians must be upbeat and happy all the time. Joy yes, but not happiness.

c. Watch with friends

Jesus chose some close friends to be with him. Verse 37: "And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled." He asked for their help in spiritual warfare. Verse 38, second half: "Remain here and watch with me." Another text says "pray," and another, "Don't let yourself come into temptation; stay here and fight with me. Fight with me."

d. Make the right decisions

3. We are to watch and pray.

a. We are weak

The 'spirit is willing but the flesh is weak' is very true and we fool ourselves when we think otherwise.

b. We are strong only through prayers

Jesus shows us how he drew strength through prayers and talking it through with the Father. That is how we will be strong. True strength comes from empowerment from God.

Conclusion

Jesus' temptation in Gethsemane is the crisis point in salvation history and encourages us to watch and pray.