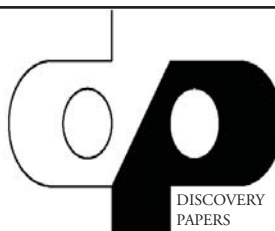


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*SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING
JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK*



Catalog No. 100711
Mark 14:32-42
43rd Message
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July 11, 2010

Jesus commands us to walk in the way of the Lord: to take up our crosses in the way of self-giving love. He promises that if we do so, we'll save our lives: we'll become, surely and eventually, what we want to be but what we can't be on our own, which is nothing more or less than what we're supposed to be. He promises that we'll come alive. Still, taking up a cross is a daunting proposition. How do we become the kind of people who walk in the way of the Lord? We don't. Or at least we don't on our own, apart from the Lord. In countless ways, the Lord teaches us and helps us to walk in his way. In Mark 14:32-42, school is in session.

After sharing the Passover meal in Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples left the city, crossed the Kidron Valley, and came to the Mount of Olives, just east of the city. After singing a hymn, they stop at a place that Mark has not yet mentioned in his gospel: Gethsemane. The word Gethsemane means "oil press." In Gethsemane, the forces of evil will converge on Jesus. Like an olive in the jaws of a press, he will be crushed for the sins of humanity. It's as if something is being squeezed out of him.

Have you ever felt, or do you currently feel, as if you're in the jaws of some sort of press, as if something is being squeezed out of you? If so, then you know something—albeit a very small something—of what Jesus endured for us.

The hour and the cup

Mark 14:32-36:

³²They came to a place named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, "Sit here until I have prayed." ³³And He took with Him Peter and James and John, and began to be very distressed and troubled. ³⁴And He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death; remain here and keep watch." ³⁵And He went a little beyond them, and fell to the ground and began to pray that if it were possible, the hour might pass Him by. ³⁶And He was saying, "Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will."¹

Although Jesus and his disciples journeyed from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the south, once they arrived at their destination, they lodged in Bethany, on the Mount of Olives, instead of in Jerusalem. During the day, they

would leave Bethany for the two-mile walk to Jerusalem, returning at night. Mark, however, now reports a break in the routine. This time, after leaving Jerusalem, Jesus stops in Gethsemane, near the foot of the Mount of Olives, just east of the city. Why stop? Jesus breaks with the routine to pray. Why Gethsemane? What's wrong with Bethany, farther to the east, just past the summit of the Mount of Olives?

As the Son of David, Jesus, the Messiah, knows the David story. A thousand years earlier, King David, along with his men, fled from Absalom, his traitorous but beloved son. They left Jerusalem, crossed the Kidron Valley, ascended the Mount of Olives, passed the summit, and fled to safety. Then David regrouped, put down the rebellion, and re-claimed the kingdom (2 Samuel 15-18). Jesus is being pursued not by a beloved son but by a beloved friend, Judas. As he walks in the footsteps of David with his men, Jesus stops at the foot of the Mount of Olives. Should he continue his ascent, like David before him? For Jesus, it is time to seek the Father.

Jesus, like David, could have fled to safety, regrouped, and put down the rebellion against God. Or, conceivably, he could have launched a sneak attack right then and there. Or he could have fled to safety, withdrawn from public life, and cultivated a private spirituality with his followers. Jesus, though, unlike so many of his followers in the centuries to follow, chooses neither violence nor withdrawal. The kingdom will be won neither by the sword nor by the monastery. He will establish neither a worldly kingdom that disavows spiritual means nor a spiritual kingdom that leaves the world unchanged.

Once in Gethsemane, Jesus takes with him Peter, James, and John, his closest friends, who promised to share his sufferings (Mark 10:38-39, 14:31). He is "very distressed and troubled," and his soul is "deeply grieved to the point of death." The English translation only begins to describe his agony. Jesus is horrified. What must this be like for the three disciples, whose leader up to this point seemed to have the answer to every question? He who seemed so in control, even detached at times, is now falling apart. Jesus asks his friends to "remain here and keep watch." Don't run. Don't fight. Don't fall asleep. Instead, keep watch: stay awake for the purpose of responding to the coming events.

Then, Jesus distances himself even from these three. This road Jesus must walk alone.

He falls to the ground and calls out to God, addressing him as “Abba,” an Aramaic word that both children and adults used when addressing their fathers in a familiar way.² Israel was God’s son (Exodus 4:22). David, inheriting the vocation of Israel, was God’s son (Psalm 2:7). Jesus, taking the vocation of Israel and David upon himself, cries out to the Father as his destiny and the unseen forces of evil press upon him. An hour is coming, and a cup is before him. The cup contains a poisonous concoction of suffering and judgment (Psalm 75:8, Isaiah 51:17, Jeremiah 25:15-16, Mark 10:38-39).

So Jesus prays: “Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will” (v. 36).

That the Son asks the Father for another way, when the Father has already shown him the way, indicates the depths of what Jesus endured, both in Gethsemane and beyond. Earlier, Jesus told a desperate father, whose son was possessed by an evil spirit, “All things are possible to him who believes.” Things worked out well for the father and his son: Jesus cast out the demon, all but raising the son from the dead. Jesus told his disciples that the kind of evil spirit that possessed the son can only come out by prayer (Mark 9:23-29). Now Jesus, the Son, echoes his own words as he prays to his Father. If all things are possible for him who believes, and if by prayer you can defeat the worst kind of evil, and if it was possible for a father’s son to be healed, should not it be possible for the cup to pass from the Son of God as he prays to God? Who believes more than the Son? Who prays better than the Son? Jesus, though, will not assert his will. He expresses it, but he doesn’t assert it. What he expresses, mostly, is a willingness to submit his will to that of the Father.

How on earth, or in heaven, for that matter, can the Father say no to a prayer like that from his only Son? How can a father keep himself from saving his child who cries out for help? When my first daughter was ten months old, she suffered a seizure. As I held her in my arms, her little body trembled, and her eyes went back into her head. I was terrified. If she was dying, I would have done anything to keep her alive. I would have gladly given my life for hers. Beyond picking up the phone and dialing 911, there was nothing I could do. The heavenly Father, though, could have moved heaven and earth to rescue his Son, his only Son. How will things work out for this Father, the Father, and this Son, the Son?

The disciples fall asleep

Mark 14:37-40:

³⁷And He came and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? ³⁸Keep watch-

ing and praying that you may not come into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” ³⁹Again He went away and prayed, saying the same words. ⁴⁰And again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to answer Him.

After praying, Jesus returns to check on his disciples. Turns out that while he has been praying, his disciples have been sleeping, even though he instructed them to keep watch. Jesus prayed that the hour might pass him by, but Peter, representing the rest of the disciples, couldn’t even stay awake for one hour. (Mark has depicted Peter, as recently as verse 31, as representing all the disciples.) As the hour of darkness approaches, Peter and the rest of the disciples remain oblivious.

Jesus instructs all the disciples (the verbs in verse 38 are plural) to watch and pray—to do what he’s been doing: to remain spiritually alert and to bring what they see to God in prayer. As the hour approaches, it brings with it a time of temptation, a time of testing. Remaining loyal to Jesus would be much more difficult than any of them had imagined. Peter, James, and John had professed stoutness in the light of day (“the spirit is willing”), but in the darkness of night, they’re wobbling (“the flesh is weak”).

Jesus returns to the Father and prays in the same manner. Despite his earlier prayer, the hour isn’t passing him by, and the cup is still before him. After his second meeting with the Father, Jesus returns to his disciples, but they’re still sleeping. They don’t know how to answer him. How could they know? They’re asleep. They don’t even know what the question is. They don’t want to know the question, nor do they want to answer the question. Mark says their eyes are very heavy. Luke says their eyes were heavy because of sorrow (Luke 22:45). Some people reason that it’s better to fall asleep and stay asleep than to face something they’d rather avoid. The disciples are no match for the power of darkness.

Although the disciples don’t know how to answer Jesus, still, the question lingers: How will the Father answer the Son?

The hour has come

Mark 14:41-42:

⁴¹And He came the third time, and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? It is enough; the hour has come; behold, the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴²Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!”

After praying to the Father for a third time, Jesus returns to his disciples again. Although Peter had pledged his loyalty, Jesus predicted that Peter would deny him three times before morning. When Jesus comes to Peter, James, and John a “third time,” they are still sleeping—a hint, perhaps, that Peter will deny Jesus three times. Peter, who can’t stay awake despite three visits by Jesus, isn’t looking like a man who would rather die with Jesus than deny him (Mark 14:30-31). David’s men came to his aid when he fled from Absalom. Jesus’ men, on the other hand, are too sleepy to help.

“It is enough,” Jesus says. He does not return to the Father for a fourth time. Why? Because “the hour has come.” How does he know? Because he sees and hears those coming from Jerusalem to arrest him. The disciples could have seen and heard them also if they were awake, for Jesus twice tells them to “behold” in connection with his approaching pursuers. Even now, the disciples can wake up and see what’s taking place—not simply physically but also spiritually.

Jesus stopped in Gethsemane to seek the Father, but the Father didn’t stop his pursuers. Jesus has his answer. The answer has come, because the hour has come. The cup is his.

Judas, a disciple of Jesus, is betraying Jesus into the hands of “sinners,” a term normally reserved for Gentiles and non-observant Jews. In that Jesus applies the term to members of the Sanhedrin, he’s saying that the Jewish leaders are no better than the pagans. Finally, Jesus tells the three disciples that the time has come to rejoin the other disciples and face Judas and those who have followed him.

Jesus doesn’t run. He doesn’t fight. Earlier, when he was preaching about the kingdom, he kept on the move, lest his enemies track him down. Now, as he brings in the kingdom, he stays and waits for his enemies. He doesn’t run. He doesn’t fight. He stays in Gethsemane, in the jaws of the press.

The first human, in so many words, told God, “Yet not what you will, but what I will,” and was expelled from the garden in Eden. Israel treated God in a similar manner, and God expelled her from the Promised Land, which was like a garden, flowing with milk and honey. By contrast, the Son of Man, the truly human one, the new Adam and the new Israel, submits to the will of God in Gethsemane, which John describes as a garden (John 18:1).

Prayer didn’t change the Father’s will; instead, prayer strengthened the Son to do the Father’s will.

The fuel in the engine

What do we do in response to Gethsemane but give thanks?

Jesus knew the biblical story and his place in it so well that he broke with the routine to seek the Father in Gethsemane. He stayed connected to the Father when we would have unplugged in favor of any way other than waiting for our enemies in Gethsemane. Abandoned by his closest friends, he walked the road that none of us could walk, alone, to stare down the powers of evil. He did not shrink from the hour of darkness or push the cup of wrath away, though they distressed and grieved him beyond words. He prayed the most intimate, trusting prayer ever prayed, expressing his will but not asserting it. He sought neither a worldly kingdom that would have disavowed spiritual means nor a spiritual kingdom that would have left the world unchanged. He listened to the Father, submitted to his will, and waited for his enemies. He stayed in the jaws of the press when we would have run for our lives.

A press squeezed the oil from olives, bringing forth valuable oil but crushing the fruit in the process. Jesus was crushed—literally and figuratively. He was crushed for the sins of humanity, bringing forth a much more valuable oil: the oil of the Holy Spirit, who was, and is, being poured out to renew both humanity and creation. When creation is completely renewed, John tells us that it will be like a garden (Revelation 21:1-22:5). Because Jesus submitted to the will of the Father in the garden of Gethsemane, those of us who call him Lord will reign with him forever in the garden of God.

We would be remiss, however, if we came the way of Gethsemane and only gave thanks for the Son. What about the Father? How could he not send the hour right past his Son? How could he not remove the cup? Why doesn’t he rescue his Son? You know the answer. What the Father did, he did for you. The prophet Isaiah, anticipating Gethsemane, said, “But the Lord was pleased to crush him” (Isaiah 53:10). Pleased? It pleased the Father to crush his Son? What, is God a masochist? An abuser of his own Son? The only possible way to understand God’s pleasure in the death of his Son is to appreciate his delight in what it accomplished. And what did it accomplish? Your salvation. In order to rescue you, the Father didn’t rescue his Son. He was constrained by his love for you to hold himself back as the dark powers did their worst to his beloved Son.

The Father gave the Son the cup, and the Son drank it. How horrifying it was! How thankful we are!

Whatever else we take away from Gethsemane, we take away thankfulness, which leads us into worship. And worship is the basis for everything. We are not simply imitators of Christ; we are also worshipers of Christ. Yes, Jesus is an example for us to follow. But if we do not worship him, we will, at best, follow him joylessly. When you come to

your own Gethsemane, if you do not revel in Jesus, you will fall asleep, just like the disciples. Worship inspires discipleship. It puts fuel in the engine, fire in the belly, steam in the stride.

Watch and pray

As followers and worshipers of Christ, what else do we take away from Gethsemane?

If we follow Jesus, he will lead us, at least at times, as he led his disciples, into Gethsemane, into the jaws of the press. There we may encounter the power of darkness: distress and grief, perhaps betrayal or the onrush of enemies.

First, if you find yourself in such a place, you might wonder if you missed a sign somewhere. Scholar N.T. Wright observes:

To all of us, in these moments, the message of Gethsemane is loud and clear: do not imagine that because you find yourself in turmoil, struggling with turbulent fear and uncertainty, this means you have come the wrong way or arrived at the wrong place. The idea that Christians should always have nothing but inner peace and tranquility is at best a half-truth, at worst a romantic or existentialist betrayal of the Jesus of Gethsemane.³

Second, we must prepare ourselves for Gethsemane. When Jesus fell to the ground in Gethsemane, it wasn't the first time he prayed. He cultivated a deep and ongoing relationship with the Father so that when he stopped in Gethsemane, he was ready to pray. Pray now and pray often so that when you find yourself in Gethsemane, you'll know what to do and how to do it. Otherwise, like the disciples, you'll be no match for the powers of darkness. Wright again:

Gethsemane is the place which reminds us that the real battle must be won on our knees in advance.⁴

Third, in Gethsemane, and in all places for that matter, watch and pray.

Don't fall asleep because life is too hard, because there's something you don't want to do, or because you're afraid of what God might want from you. Sometimes, when I'm being criticized, I get sleepy. It doesn't take a psychoanalyst to diagnose my condition: my drowsiness is a defense mechanism. Instead of taking in painful information (which could, quite possibly, be helpful, by the way), I shut down. Like the disciples in Gethsemane, I check out. By contrast, I know of a follower of Jesus who was dying of cancer but refused pain medication. Why? She said, "I have to keep growing." Refusing pain medica-

tion isn't for everyone, though Jesus tells all his followers to remain watchful, attentive even to potentially painful developments.

Trust not in your own understanding, which will incline you toward getting yourself out of the spot you're in. Instead, seek out the Father. Remain watchful, spiritually alert, and bring what you see to the Father in prayer. Express your will but don't assert it. Don't fight; don't lash out in anger. Don't run; face the chaos. A Benedictine sister, speaking of her vocation, puts it this way:

One needs a deep prayer life to maintain a celibate life. It is only through prayer that the hard choices get made, over time, only prayer that can give me the self-transcendence that celibacy requires.⁵

Stay in Gethsemane, at least for a while. Let Gethsemane school you in the way of the Lord: the way of the cross, the way of the Servant, the way of suffering love. Watch and pray for the purpose of responding spiritually to the coming events, for the purpose of walking in the way of the Lord.

Fourth, what if you stop to seek the Father but he doesn't stop the pressure. What if the hour doesn't pass you by and the cup is not removed? What if after praying one, two, three, a hundred times, nothing changes? What if you pray "Abba, Father" in Gethsemane and the answer is a cross on Golgotha? If the hour doesn't pass and the cup is not removed, then that means the Father has a mission for you. A mission that has nothing to do with lashing out in anger or cultivating a private spirituality and everything to do with self-giving love. He has an hour for you to face and a cup for you to drink: a way for you to participate in—and implement—the victory of the cross, even if it's a mission you wouldn't have chosen for yourself. If the Father has a mission for you, will you go? Will you do it for the Father, who delights in you? For the Son, who was crushed for you? For the Spirit, who renews you? Will you do it for the One you worship—Father, Son, and Spirit?

I was speaking recently with a woman whose husband left her twelve years earlier for another woman. As I heard her story, I was in awe of how she walked with the Lord, both through the divorce and after it. As she told me what she's doing now, I recognized that God has given her a voice to speak—about relationships and contentment—that I don't have. The distinct ministry she has emerged out of her own pain.

When you come to Gethsemane, you come wondering if there's another way. You pray that the Father will make another way. Oftentimes, he doesn't. Whether or not your prayer influences the Father's will, it strengthens you to do his will, whatever it turns out to be. N.T. Wright:

And we are therefore the people called in our turn to go and wait in Gethsemane. We are the people called now to wrestle with the strange purposes of God in the time between the passion of Jesus and the final redemption of the whole creation. We are the people called neither to take up arms and force the kingdom upon an unwilling world nor to run away into a private spirituality.... We are the people called ... into betrayal and suffering, into the ambiguous and agonizing position of wrestling with the purposes of God, into knowing that we might have got it wrong, into wondering in anguish if maybe there's a different way after all, into being misunderstood by friends and family, into fightings without and fears within. The disciples fell asleep in the garden; we are called to stay awake, to be alert, to see what the issues are and what stand must be taken, to do business with the one Jesus called Abba, Father, even if the voices all around us, and even within us, tell us we might be getting it all horribly wrong.⁶

On the road

Let the story of Gethsemane—what the Son did, what the Father did—take your breath away and lead you into worship. Worship, which includes thankfulness and adoration, heightens the senses. If Jesus tells us to watch and pray for the purpose of walking in the way of self-giving love, then worship helps us do so.

Every three months or so, I separate myself from my routine to spend long hours in prayer and worship. As I return, I'm usually more sensitive to my surroundings. On one such occasion, in a more spiritually sensitive state, I noticed a hitchhiker. As usual, I passed by—but a mile down the road, I asked the Father, "Should I pick him up?"

Before I finished my question, the Father answered it. Or perhaps I answered it; I can't be sure. The three-word answer felt like an intrusion—and a rather violent one at that: "PICK HIM UP!" I made a U-turn and drove back to offer the hitchhiker a ride. But when I returned, he was gone.

If it was God who had instructed me to pick up the hitchhiker, I was satisfied that I had obeyed him but relieved that nothing more was required of me. Happily, I resumed my journey—only to be interrupted again ten miles down the road. A hitchhiker—the same one—was standing at an intersection, wanting a ride. Another driver had given him a ride to this intersection. I didn't need to

pray this time; I just needed to open the door and offer him a ride. He got in.

He told me about his work as a theater critic. I told him that I had visited a local church to pray. He said he had visited that church once, not for spiritual reasons but for a community event. We spoke only briefly. Five miles later, our paths diverged. I dropped him off at an intersection, where he waited for another ride. The buildup to our encounter seemed ordained, but the encounter itself seemed inconsequential. Who's to say, however, what's consequential and what isn't?

In any event, worship helped me watch and pray—and walk (or drive) in the way of self-giving love, at least for a few miles. Worship, watch, and pray—and walk in the way of the Lord. The Father has a mission for you. What is it? You'll have to ask him about that. Get up; let us be going.

NOTES

¹ Literary structure:

A They came to Gethsemane for purpose of prayer (32)

B Jesus to three disciples: "keep watch" (33-34)

C Jesus prayed regarding hour and cup (35-36)

X Jesus came and found disciples sleeping (37)

C' Jesus prayed, saying the same words (39)

B' Jesus came twice more and found disciples sleeping (40-41a)

A' Hour has come; "let us be going" (41b-42)

² Jesus spoke in Aramaic, the Hebrew dialect of the day. The authors of the New Testament, who wrote in Greek, translated Jesus' words into that language. On rare occasions, they employed Aramaic words for effect. Mark preserves the Aramaic words of Jesus here and in Mark 7:34, 14:36, and 15:34.

³ N.T. Wright, *The Way of the Lord* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 89.

⁴ Wright, 90.

⁵ Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 261.

⁶ Wright, 87.