

AGONY, ARREST, AND ABANDONMENT

SERIES: THE FINAL HOURS



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Matthew 26:36-56
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Andy Burnham
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We are currently in the season of Lent—a season traditionally characterized by prayer, reflection, and fasting. It is a season when followers of Jesus focus on the Lord’s journey to the cross and prepare their hearts for the resurrection. It is a season for contemplating suffering while anticipating joy.

Suffering, of course, is difficult to contemplate much less experience. Indeed, suffering is something we generally avoid at all costs, whether it is personal suffering or the suffering of others. This is particularly true in our own culture, which seems continually in need of amusement and entertainment. We have a low tolerance for boredom and an even lower tolerance for suffering and accompanying emotions like sorrow and sadness.

However, as many have observed, there is no record in the Bible of Jesus laughing—no record of him seeking amusement or entertainment. Indeed, he is described in exactly the opposite terms. As it says in Isaiah 53:3, he was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” He wept over Jerusalem and wept at Lazarus’ tomb. His mission was one of profound seriousness—dying for the sins of the world—which was the exact antithesis of anything amusing or entertaining.

During the season of Lent, I hope we will come to understand that the Lord’s suffering and sorrow were ultimately expressions of his love. It says in 1 John 4:8, “God is love” and again in John 4:24, “God is spirit.” God is the spirit of pure love, pure *agape*. God’s essence, God’s nature, is characterized by selfless and self-sacrificial love. In Jesus, selfless love became incarnate. Selfless love took on human form—a form that is most fully and powerfully revealed in Christ’s suffering on the cross. As Jesus declared, “Greater love [*agape*] has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

I’ve entitled today’s sermon, “Agony, Arrest, and Abandonment.” These words describe the main events in Gethsemane, the scene of today’s passage. In Gethsemane, the Lord first agonizes in prayer, is then

arrested, and is finally abandoned by his followers. Hopefully, too, as we study today’s passage, we will learn how to respond during our own times of crisis. We will learn how to respond during our own times of feeling in agony, literally or figuratively arrested, and abandoned.

Agony

Today’s passage begins with “The Agony in the Garden,” as it has historically been known. It begins with the Lord’s deep inner struggle—his deep inner wrestling—as the cross looms before him and the cost of his sacrifice becomes increasingly real. Read how Matthew recounts events in the dark garden illuminated by the full Passover moon.

Matthew 26:36-46:

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here, while I go over there and pray.” 37 And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. 38 Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.” 39 And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” 40 And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour? 41 Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” 42 Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” 43 And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. 44 So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. 45 Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46 Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand.”

Gethsemane was a garden on the Mount of Olives containing an olive press—a press used to crush olives in order to extract the oil. Indeed, the word Gethsemane means ‘olive press’. In many ways, the word Gethsemane is also a fitting metaphor for the inner crushing the Lord undergoes. In Luke’s account, that crushing is said to have been so intense that it actually caused the Lord to sweat blood, perhaps the result of capillaries bursting beneath his skin (Luke 22:44).

In a moment, we will look at the cause of the Lord’s agony—the cause of his being crushed. However, to begin with, let me make a few observations.

First, for whatever reason, the Lord chose to take three of the apostles with him to an area of the garden that was removed from the rest of his followers. These three apostles—Peter, James, and John—were the same apostles the Lord took with him up the Mount of Transfiguration when he appeared gloriously transformed before them along with Moses and Elijah. These three apostles had seen Jesus at the heights and now they were seeing him in the depths. They had seen him in a state of exaltation and now they were seeing him in a state of abject sorrow—sorrow nearly to the point of death.

Second, it is amazing that the Lord would share this moment with any of his followers. Leaders generally want to be perceived as bold and confident, not struggling and conflicted. And yet, as it says in Hebrews, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus went through life as a human being, as a real person, who knew what it was like to struggle and face difficulties. Here, in the garden, he graciously gives Peter, James, and John (and ourselves), the opportunity to witness that struggle, to witness his humanity.

And third, I would observe—or at least speculate—that the Lord had a specific objective in bringing Peter, James, and John with him to Gethsemane. He did not bring them there on some idle whim or by pure chance. Rather, the Lord was seeking to accomplish something in their lives. He was, I believe, seeking to teach them something—to teach them how to go through the agonizing times of life. He was seeking to provide them with a living example, showing them of how to deal with struggle and temptation without succumbing to sin.

As for the Lord’s agony itself, interestingly, his agony is caused by sorrow, not by fear or regret. The Lord is not afraid of going to the cross. He is not trembling in fear at the thought of the physical pain, assuming punishment for the world’s sins, dying, or even separation from the Father. He is also not experiencing regret. He is not experiencing doubts or second thoughts about being the Messiah or about accomplishing what he came to do. His agony is not from fear or regret but from deep sorrow—sorrow that almost kills him.

And what kind of sorrow is that? What kind of sorrow is the Lord struggling with and finding so incredibly troubling? I suspect that we glimpse similar sorrow when Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus—wept even knowing that he would raise Lazarus from the dead. He wept, no doubt because he saw the impact of sin and death. He saw the grief, loss, and anguish that had entered into his perfect creation. He wept over a marred creation, over a creation that was not the way he had originally created it.

What we sometimes fail to realize is that every sin comes with its own accompanying death and loss. From the Lord’s perspective, every sin is a heartbreak. It is a source of sorrow, and when the Lord assumed the sin of the world he not only assumed its punishment, he also assumed its sorrow. As it says in Isaiah 53:4, “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.” Every sin causes Jesus sorrow, and the anticipation of assuming the sin of the entire world caused him sorrow to the point of death.

As I said, Jesus’ prayer reveals his humanity—“Let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” It reveals Jesus’ human struggle—his inner struggle between ‘my will’ and ‘Thy will’; between his own will and the Father’s will. Jesus is the God-man—fully God and fully human—and as such he knows what it is like to be conflicted, to be pulled in different directions.

Jesus’ prayer expresses this struggle. It expresses the inner tension between his humanity and his deity. In his humanity, the Lord longs for another way. He longs for a way that will avoid sorrow and suffering. In his deity, he longs for his Father’s will to be done. He longs to drink whatever cup the Father has called him to drink. Ultimately, within the Lord, these two conflicting desires are not of equal strength. Ultimately, as his prayer expresses, the one desire is submissive to the other. The human desire is submissive to the divine—my will be done is submissive to Thy will be done.

I believe this is what Jesus was seeking to teach Peter, James, and John, and teach us of course as well. When we encounter the trials and temptations of life and are feeling conflicted, we need to turn to our heavenly Father in prayer. We need to pour out our heart and our desires to him. In Mark's account, by the way, in Gethsemane, the Lord addresses his Father as *Abba*, which is equivalent to the word 'Daddy,' a term of affection and approachability. In times of trouble, we need to turn to God as our Daddy. We need to turn to him knowing that he loves us and wants to hear from us. As we are told in Hebrews, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

And yet, having turned to God in prayer and having poured out our hearts to him, we ultimately need to submit our will to God's. We need to submit our own will to his, even when his will may be far different or even opposed to our own. Our heavenly Father knows what is best for us, even when it may not seem that way. Our own knowledge, our own understanding, is limited while our heavenly Father's is not. We see a small part of the painting while he sees the entire canvas. That is why we are told in Proverbs, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Sadly, as we look at Peter, James, and John in Gethsemane, their response was far different from that of Jesus. The Lord invited them to join him in prayer. He invited them to enter with him into the struggle. Instead, they fell asleep. In fact, they fell asleep in spite of the Lord's repeated attempts to rouse them. Ironically, these same three apostles became sleepy on the Mount of Transfiguration when Jesus appeared in his glory (Luke 9:32). As someone observed, both on the Mount of Transfiguration and in Gethsemane they clearly had no problem with insomnia.

Thankfully, Jesus identifies the apostles' problem. He identifies why they were unable to stay awake and join him in prayer. He declares the famous words that many of us have no doubt felt as well: "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). The apostles wanted to do what was right, but they lacked the power. The flesh was weak; the flesh was inadequate. The power of self-effort could not accomplish what was needed. This is the same idea the apostle Paul expresses in Romans 7, "...I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing" (Romans 7:18b-19).

The real power that was needed was the power of the Spirit not the power of the flesh. This is one of the central concepts that we learned last year in our study of Acts. As Jesus told his followers shortly before ascending to heaven, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). We cannot carry out God's purposes in our own strength. We need God's power to obey God's commands. At this point in the lives of Peter, James, and John, they simply did not have that power. They simply were not able to do what they needed to do.

Arrest

We now move now from agony to arrest.

Matthew 26:47-56a:

While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. 48 Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; seize him." 49 And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" And he kissed him. 50 Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you came to do." Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. 51 And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. 52 Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. 53 Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? 54 But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" 55 At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. 56 But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled."

Down through the centuries, many sermons have been given on these verses. This morning, however, I would like to focus mainly on four points—four aspects of the Lord's response. I would like to focus on the Lord's response to the overall situation, his response to Judas' betrayal, his response to the sword-wielding man (who, as John tells us, was Peter), and his response to the arresting crowd. His responses, I believe, are meant to be

instructive. They are meant to teach us how to respond to external pressures, just as the earlier passage was meant to teach us how to respond to internal pressures.

As for the Lord's response to the overall situation, to begin with, in terms of the situation itself, there has been considerable debate about the size of the crowd that came to arrest Jesus. Matthew tells us that it was a large crowd; John adds that there was a cohort or detachment of Roman soldiers (John 18:3), most likely between 200 and 600 men. Some have estimated that the crowd was as large as a thousand people. One way or the other, the size of the crowd was completely disproportionate to the size of the problem. As someone said, it was like sending out the National Guard to deal with a small homeless encampment.

In response to this large crowd—a crowd armed with swords and clubs—Jesus takes no evasive action, does not run, and does not resist. He doubtless could have found some other location—a location that was much harder to find. Instead, he simply went to his regular place, a place Judas was well aware of. As John tells us, Judas knew the location because Jesus often met there with his disciples (John 18:2). Jesus also could have run away when he heard the crowd approaching. He could have raced off through olive groves and escaped in the darkness. Instead, he chose to go and meet the crowd. He chose to walk directly up to those who had come to arrest him. Moreover, he could have resisted or at least objected to the arrest itself. He could have told his followers to defend him and to put up a heroic last stand. Instead, he did no such thing. He put up no resistance whatsoever.

How is this kind of response possible? How is it possible to remain calm, cool, and collected even when facing a militant crowd? Interestingly, twice in these verses, Jesus mentions the fulfillment of the Scriptures. He mentions that prophecy was being fulfilled. The events taking place were occurring precisely as they had been predicted, precisely as they had been prophesied. Regardless of how the events may have appeared to everyone else in the garden, the entire situation was under control. Everything was under the sovereign control of God, in line with the eternal foreknowledge of the Creator. Even though Jesus had agonized in prayer, he knew he was in the heart of the Father's will for his life. He knew the story of redemption was unfolding exactly as it had been ordained, and it was this knowledge that allowed him to remain calm and composed.

While it is true that we don't have scriptures about the specific events in our own lives, we do have scriptures assuring us of God's sovereignty. We have scriptures, like Romans 8:28, declaring that everything in our lives is under God's control and working together for good. As the apostle Paul puts it, "...all things work together for good, for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose." To the degree that we can lay hold of this wonderful truth firmly and consistently, especially during times of crisis, we will find ourselves experiencing assurance and confidence as well. We will find ourselves able to remain calm and composed regardless of the external pressures.

Jesus' response to Judas is truly amazing. Not only did Judas betray the Lord, he betrayed him with a kiss. He betrayed him with a sign indicating friendship. In fact, the Greek word for 'kiss', *kataphileo*, is the same word used for the kiss that the father gave to his returning prodigal son (Luke 15:20) and the same word used for the kiss the Ephesians elders gave to Paul on the beach at Miletus when they learned they would never see him again (Acts 20:37). Judas made something evil appear good. Just as Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:4), so Judas masqueraded as a true friend, even though his intentions were diabolical and sinister.

In response to Judas' betrayal, Jesus does not lash out or become angry. He does not draw back from the kiss or rebuke Judas for his hypocrisy. He knows Judas has made up his mind and will not be deterred, which is perhaps why he tells him, "Do what you came to do." And yet, incredible as it may seem, Jesus addresses Judas as 'friend'. He expresses love for Judas, even while Judas is betraying him. He provides an illustration for his words in the Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:43-45). This, of course, is how we should respond to our own enemies as well, continuing to love them even when they may be seeking to betray, persecute, harm, abuse, or even kill us.

As for the Lord's response to Peter, when Jesus was first arrested, Peter sprang into action, taking a sword and cutting off the ear of the servant of the high priest. Peter was almost certainly attempting to kill the man, whose name was Malchus (John 18:10). However, it appears Malchus ducked and lost only his ear rather than his head. Almost certainly, too, Peter was attempting to make good his on promise to die if necessary for the Lord (Matthew 26:35). Such courage was perhaps admirable,

but it was courage based on Peter's own strength and ability. It was Peter relying on himself to accomplish what he felt was required.

One can only imagine Peter's dismay when the Lord responded to his seemingly heroic efforts by telling him to put away his sword and (as we learn in Luke) healed Malchus' ear—an ear that had actually been cut off (Luke 22:50-51). Peter's valiant attempt to defend Jesus had been brushed aside and his efforts had come to nothing. On top of that, the Lord rebuked him—or, more accurately, the Lord rebuked him twice.

First, Jesus told Peter that whoever will live by the sword will die by the sword. This is, by the way, not a condemnation of those in the military or the police force. Indeed, Paul tells us that people in proper positions of authority “do not bear the sword in vain” (Romans 13:4). Rather, the Lord is condemning those who would take matters into their own hands—those would take the law into their own hands—which was exactly what Peter was doing.

And second, the Lord told Peter, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” A legion was a military unit of 6,000 soldiers, making twelve legions of angels equivalent to 72,000 angels. As many writers have noted, in 2 Kings 19:35, one angel is recorded as killing 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in a single night. In other words, the Lord is telling Peter, “I don't need your help. In fact, anytime I like, I can summon help that is beyond anything you can imagine.”

In this, the Lord is attempting to teach Peter (and us) that we should not take matters into our own hands—that we should not grab swords and lop off ears, either literally or figuratively. We need to understand that the Lord has far greater resources than we can imagine—resources that can be brought to bear on any situation. As Paul tells us in Ephesians, the Lord “is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20). God can provide whatever help he deems necessary, and if he does not provide the help we think we need, then we do not need it—then he has some bigger plan in mind.

The Lord's response to the arresting crowd is a wonderful example of Proverbs 28:1, “The righteous are bold as a lion.” Jesus is the Lion of the tribe of Judah and he demonstrates lion-like boldness as he addresses those who had come to arrest him. Indeed, in John's account, we learn that Jesus actually uttered the divine name. When the arresting officials announced they

were looking for Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord replied, “I am he”—or, literally, “I AM.” In that moment, the crowd drew back and fell to the ground, acknowledging they were in the presence of a power far greater than themselves (John 18:4-5).

Moreover, Jesus interrogated the arresting officials rather than the other way around. He questioned them, not them him. He bluntly asked them why they hadn't arrested him in public in the daytime when there had been multiple opportunities. Earlier in his ministry, Jesus had said, “...people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil” (John 3:19b). Undeniably, Jesus was conveying this same idea to those who had come in darkness to arrest him. In reality, they were not merely in physical darkness, they were in spiritual darkness, demonstrating that their works were evil.

We are not to take matters into our own hands like Peter did, but here the Lord teaches us that we can take a bold stand for what is right. No, we are not to be holier-than-thou, self-righteous, or judgmental. However, we are to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). We are to stand up and declare that evil is evil. Jesus is the light of the world and when he comes to dwell in us, his light will expose what is done in darkness.

Abandonment

After the agony and the arrest, we now read one last sad sentence in our section for today—a section having to do with abandonment. Matthew writes,

Matthew 26:56b:

“Then all the disciples left him and fled.”

Psychologists tell us that we have a built-in fight-or-flight response. We want to survive, want to live, and when we perceive danger, our fight-or-flight response is activated. We either hit or run, whichever seems to offer the best possibility of survival. Peter's initial response was to fight—to swing his sword at Malchus. Having been rebuked by the Lord for that response, he and the other disciples now resort to flight. They run in an effort to save themselves, run in an effort to save their own skins.

In some ways, the fight-or-flight response is perfectly understandable. It is simply the way we are wired. We have a survival instinct and our fight-or-flight response helps us to survive when our safety appears to be in jeopardy. However, sometimes our personal survival or safety may not be the most important thing. In

fact, sometimes saving our own skins can be an act of cowardice and selfishness. For example, when saving our own skins means abandoning someone else, perhaps someone we love, then clearly we have placed our own needs about the needs of others. In retrospect, the disciples must have felt selfish and cowardly, abandoning Jesus in favor of their own personal safety—abandoning him after emphatically insisting they never would.

It is only one sentence, “Then all the disciples left him and fled.”, but it is a sentence filled with poignancy and sorrow. Yes, the Lord knew his followers would forsake him. Yes, he had told them they would, quoting the prophecy from Zechariah 13:7, “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.” And yet, now, Zechariah’s prophecy had come to pass. Now, his followers actually had fled, leaving him forsaken and alone, at least in terms of human support.

Thankfully, at this point, the Lord still had divine support. He still had the support of the Father and the Holy Spirit. However, in just a few hours, even that support will be removed. On the cross, the Lord will cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46b). On the cross, when bearing the sin of the world, Jesus will be left completely abandoned, completely alone, and completely forsaken.

It is impossible to fathom the depths of what Jesus went through in Gethsemane, facing agony, arrest, and abandonment. In the coming weeks, as we accompany the Lord to the crucifixion, his suffering and sorrow will become even more unfathomable. And yet, as we journey with the Lord to his death, I hope we will gain a deeper appreciation of his suffering. I hope, too, that we will gain a deeper appreciation of his love—love that is undeniable, compelling, and personal.

Lent is of course also a season of anticipation. It is a season for anticipating Jesus’ glorious resurrection on Easter morning. His sorrow, suffering, and death are not the end of the story. In fact, they are really just the beginning. That is why the writer of Hebrews says, “... 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” (Hebrews 12:2). Jesus endured the

cross because he was looking forward to the joy that was set before him. And what was that joy? It was the joy of spending eternity with you and me. It was the joy of knowing that his death would bring about life, eternal life, for all who placed their faith in him.