

MOVING ON TO MATURITY

Praying When Desperate (Hebrews 5:7-9)

Have you ever felt desperate? Maybe it was when you were about to go to the doctor to see about the lump you had discovered. Maybe it was the night before you were to go to court over your arrest warrant. Maybe it was when you were about to confront your teen about something you had found in her room. Whether the cause was physical, emotional, or even criminal, there have probably been times in your lives when you have felt desperate.

Another question: When you felt desperate, did you take your desperation to God in prayer? Or did your desperation degenerate into a host of physical or emotional expressions, such as discouragement, high blood pressure, or a snippy attitude? Often God uses our desperation to get our attention. And He uses it as an opportunity either **to rescue** us from the desperate situation or **to reassure** us of his presence within his will, giving us courage to walk through the desperate situation.

There was one time in Jesus' life when he was desperate. In our ongoing study through the book of Hebrews we come today to a reference to that time in Jesus' life when he was desperate. Hebrews 5:7-9.

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

Most students of Scripture believe this reference in Hebrews 5 is to Jesus' intense prayer session in the Garden of Gethsemane. We are invited through the lens of Scripture to watch with Jesus there. And in watching Him, we learn from him about praying when desperate.

Praying when desperate, Jesus shows us prayer that is specific, intense, and effective.

The Gethsemane scene is a place I have never gone before in a sermon. It is a place of divine mystery where Jesus, the Son of Man, struggles with the implications of his mission as the Savior, the Son of God. The ground is holy. I take off my shoes in symbolic reverence, for when we come to Gethsemane, we stand on holy ground.

Gethsemane: Matthew 26:36-46

"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." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." (Matthew 26:36-38)

As our Lord walked deeper into the garden, accompanied by his three closest friends, His inner anguish became increasingly apparent. Matthew here describes it as "he began to be sorrowful and troubled." The word "began" indicates the commencement of a new level of sorrow more

severe than our Lord had ever experienced before. Jesus' emotional state is described as "sorrowful and troubled" by Matthew or "overwhelmed" by Mark (14:33). One could almost translate it by the word terrified.

Our Lord had for a long time foreseen the time of His sacrificial death in our behalf. He had, on numerous occasions, predicted it. Yet when it now came clearly into view in its immediacy, its horror exceeded the anticipations of the human Jesus and terrified Him! Remember though Christ was 100% God, He had laid aside His glory and was functioning as a man. This was, as Hebrews 5 states, "during the days of Jesus' life on earth." Not one of us has ever approached such a degree of inner trauma.

In this intensely troubled state, Jesus requested the three friends to remain at that spot and "watch." The tense of the verb indicates He intended them to continuously remain awake and alert.

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed,
(Matthew 26:39a)

After withdrawing a little way from the three disciples, "a stone's throw" according to Luke's Gospel, Jesus "fell on his face" (Matthew 26:39) or "knelt down" (Luke 22:41). Mark uses a verb tense indicating a continuous action (Mark 14:35) of repeatedly falling down. To say the least, the language indicates a desperate struggle. It is the most graphic portrait of the titanic struggle of the soul, of praying when desperate.

His prayer was specific. *"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."* No doubt, his prayer session was lengthy—long enough for three disciples to fall asleep, as we shall see in a minute—and involved many more words than this simple sentence. But this was the specific substance: *"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."*

Christ usual prayer address was simply, "Father." But in this instance Jesus adds a tender, emotional element, "My Father."

There are two petitions. The first petition begins with the phrase, "If it is possible." The grammar indicates there was no question in Christ's mind of the Father's ability. Our Lord was fully confident He was able to cause the cup to pass from Him. It was not a question of God's **ability** but of **His will**.

The request was to escape from the cup. The image of "Cup" was used figuratively in the Old Testament for God's wrath (see Psalms 75:8, *"In the hand of the LORD is a cup...He pours it out and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs."*).

The cup in this instance refers to the Cross and all the anguish that would be involved in it, both physical and spiritual. The chief horror in the mind of Christ was the thought of being made sin on behalf of you and me! Jesus knew the anguished cry of the Messianic Psalm 22 would soon be coming from his mouth, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

Is there any other way? The human Jesus had to ask. Yet, while asking, one thing is clear: Christ desired the Father's will above all else. The second petition: "*Yet not as I will, but as you will.*"

Luke alone records that after this prayer struggle, an angel strengthened Christ (Luke 22:43). Our Lord then returned to His disciples.

"Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. 'Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?' he asked Peter. 'Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.'"
(Matthew 26:40-41).

Our Lord awakened the three disciples and urged them to pray—not for him even—but for themselves that they would not enter into temptation. Christ prayed to be spared from the cup but urged them to pray for their strengthening against the temptation or trial that was about to come toward them, as associates of Jesus. As events proved, it was not the Father's will to spare either Christ the Crucifixion or the disciples the accusation that they were Christ's followers. Lack of prayer deprived the disciples of the victory which Christ, through prayer, won that night. Clearly, through prayer Jesus was strengthened to proceed into drinking the cup of suffering courageously. Clearly, through lack of prayer, the disciples when faced with potential persecution, scattered from him or denied knowing him.

"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.' When he came back he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing."
(Matthew 26:42-44).

In this second part of the sequence, Luke gives even more detail concerning Jesus' desperation in prayer. Luke says Jesus was "in agony" (22:44) so much so that Christ "sweat as it were great drops of blood." Let us appreciate the love of the Savior for us to go forward in the emotional agony of this moment. Jesus prayed hardest when it was hardest to pray.

Only Matthew gives us a hint as to what words were said in the second prayer session: *'My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done'* (26:42). Clearly, this second prayer shows an advance upon the first. The address is exactly the same ("my Father"), but the content of the petition is quite different. Instead of asking, "If it is possible for this cup to be taken away, this time He states the condition in the form of a negative: "If it is not possible for this cup to be taken away..." He now accepts the resolution—he knows that it is not possible.

Christ was now realizing the absolute will of God included his drinking the cup of God's wrath. The second session of prayer ends with the same earnest petition: "May your will be done."

Jesus goes back to where his disciples were. He hoped they would be watching and praying for themselves, that they would not enter temptation. But he found them sleeping again. Instead of awakening them, he simply returns to his place of private prayer for a third session. Matthew says he "*prayed the third time, saying the same thing.*" (26:44).

It is toward this holy ground moment that Hebrews refers in our sermon text today of Hebrews 5:7-9:

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

This paragraph in its context in Hebrews is supporting the point that Jesus is qualified to be our High Priest. That he was “in all points tempted like we are, yet without sin. Some people have needlessly wondered if the sinless Jesus can really empathize, sympathize, and identify with us sinners, since he was able not to sin and also not able to sin?

To answer, let me give an illustration. Last December an unusual warning was issued for the Oregon Coast. A high wind advisory was issued three days before the date the storm was predicted to arrive, December 2, 2007. Suppose you were the owner of a yacht in the Astoria Marina. You went down to the marina, but instead of pulling the boat out, you secured it. You ran lines from every direction, tying it down to every mooring and every dock in every direction. Your yacht was not only able not to sink, it was not able to sink. So then the winds arrived. The storm lashed the boat with winds and waves, and still it held secure. After the winds had subsided, you arrived to survey the scene. Other boats had been bashed against the docks or had sunk out of sight. Only your boat was unharmed, tied down safely and securely from damage. But let me ask a question: Out of all the boats, which one felt the storm most fiercely? Not the ones who were pulled out of the water before the storm came. Not the ones that sank after a mere 3 hours of wind. Not the ones whose lines broke, allowing them to drift and smash up against the dock. No, the boat that felt the greatest force of the wind was the one that, ironically, did not sink. It was your boat that, if it could talk, could give a full accounting of all the storms intensity. So it is with Jesus Christ, our High Priest. Although he was able not to sin, and also not able to sin, he still felt the full intensity of the sin storm against him. It was in Gethsemane Jesus Christ felt the full force of the temptation. The temptation to turn aside from the horror of being the sin bearer, to turn aside from drinking the cup of God's wrath, to turn aside from affirming, “not my will, but Thine be done,” and to turn aside from learning obedience by the things he suffered.

In seeing the holy ground moment, this private and personal scene in the life of my Lord, I learn about praying when desperate. His desperation was relieved through specific, intense, effective prayer.

1. Was Jesus' prayer specific? Yes: “*My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.*” Christ's specific prayer was two-fold. One, that if possible he not have to endure the agony ahead. And, two, that his will is submitted to the Father's will. Although the Father God could not grant what the human Jesus requested in his first specific item, Jesus' prayer was fully answered in regard to the second. He was given the courage to face the upcoming torment with calm and confident resolve. “For the joy set before him he endured the cross, despising its shame.”

So often, our prayers become trite platitudes to bless this and bless that. Make sure your prayers are specific enough that you know whether or not God answered them. Have you ever had the disconcerting situation in which you are eating a meal with your family and someone pipes up, “Did we bless the food?” And you can’t remember whether or not you did? If you can’t remember whether you prayed yet, perhaps your prayers are not specific enough.

2. Was Jesus’ prayer intense? Yes, certainly. As our text in Hebrews declares, “*he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears.*” The Gospels tell of him kneeling and falling to the ground. Luke adds that he even sweat as it were drops of blood. His prayer was intense.

Are our prayers intense? One comic strip character once said, “Our situation is desperate but we are not.” That may describe the state of our church. We are beginning to understand how desperately we need the touch of God upon us. Our leaders—Pastor David, the Pastoral Staff, and the Elders—have agreed we need to have a Season of Seeking these next three months. A time in which there will be weekly prayer guides available to remind us to come before God in prayer, individually and in our various ministry groups. We will also come before God, praying when desperate, as a whole church on three Sunday evenings—April 27, May 25, and June 29. May the needs of our church for finances, unity, unselfishness, and evangelistic compassion make us desperate to seek the only one to whom we can go.

3. Was Jesus’ prayer effective? Yes, it was. Christ’s will was affirmed to be united with the will of the Father. For he prayed, “*Yet not as I will, but as you will.*” As Hebrews 5 boldly states Jesus’ prayer was effective: “*he offered up prayers and petitions...and he was heard.*”

Even though he did not want to go forward toward the Cross, he reaffirmed that this was the will of His Father. As Hebrews concludes (8) *Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered* (9) *and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.*

Communion Celebration: Today we come together as a Church, as Christ’s People, to the Lord’s Table. The Holy Ground of Gethsemane leads into the Holy Ground of Communion. The Communion elements of bread and juice are available to each of you. To re-affirm your faith in Jesus, go to one of the tables to take this symbolic representation of his body and blood given for you. Stand in awe before the Holy Ground of Gethsemane. Because it was not possible for the Cup of God’s wrath to be taken from Him, the cup of Communion is offered to you. We can celebrate Jesus as “the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”

Maybe you have never trusted Christ as your Savior before. The invitation is to make this time as the time you receive Christ into your life. Let this symbolism be the expression of your trust in taking Christ into your heart, as you take this bread and juice into your body.