

If you have your Bible, turn with me to Luke 22. We are going to be reading from verses 39-44 today.

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

Over the course of the last ten years, I've had the privilege of leading several different groups on a trip to the Holy Land. We visit Israel, Greece, and Italy, and we go to the places where the events of the Bible took place. When people walk where Jesus walked and see the places where he taught and performed miracles, they say it's a shift in their mind—like going from watching TV in black and white to watching in HD full color. It helps things come alive. On these trips we visit 20-25 different places. We visit the Colosseum in Rome, where Christians were thrown to the gladiators and to wild animals. We visit the Areopagus and the Acropolis in Athens, where Paul preached to the leading philosophers of his day. We visit the Jewish temple, where sacrifices were made for hundreds of years. We visit the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus performed over 70% of his miracles. We see so many incredible places. Toward the end of every trip, I always ask people, "What was your favorite site? Of all the places you saw, where did God spoke to you most powerfully?" I am always shocked by how frequently people respond by saying the Garden of Gethsemane. Compared to the other places we visit, the Garden of Gethsemane has far less notoriety. There's no breathtaking panoramic view, no beautiful ancient buildings—there is simply a small church where people can pray and about 50 olive trees, some of which are over 1,500 years old. It's a neat place, but again, compared to the other sites we visit, at an aesthetic level, at an archaeological and architectural level, it doesn't seem that impressive. I ask each person why it stood out to them so much. Every time they talk about what it is like being in the place where Jesus prayed through the night, what it is like being in the place where Jesus was under such emotional and spiritual agony that the capillaries in his forehead burst and his sweat turned into drops of blood.

There is something special and powerful about the Garden of Gethsemane that goes beyond what you can see with your eyes. We know that Jesus ultimately surrendered his life for us on the cross at Golgotha, and we know that Jesus' body was laid in the empty tomb—those are the two places where the climactic events of salvation took place. But it was in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus fell to his knees and through agonizing prayer got his heart and mind in a place where he could willingly surrender himself to be arrested by wicked men, paraded through a kangaroo court presided over by hypocrites and liars, spat on and slapped in the face, stripped naked and beaten, paraded through the city streets as a mocking spectacle, and then nailed to a cross and ran through with a spear. How could the all-powerful creator of the universe subject himself to such humiliation and pain, such disgrace and injustice? It was in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus brought all the fear, all the anxiety and uncertainty that would come with a moment like that. He took it all, brought it to God, and ultimately resolved to give up his rights and lay down his life.

He was 100% honest about his desire: he did not want to suffer, but in the Garden he subordinated his immediate desire for deliverance to his ultimate desire to honor his Father and save the world. Thank God that he did, because it was your salvation and my salvation that hung in the balance. In that moment, Jesus preferred obedience to his Father and he preferred his love for you and for me, more than he did his own life—one more reason to thank him, honor him, and worship him. In addition to having yet another

reason to praise Jesus, when I read this passage, I see several different ways we can faithfully apply what we learn from Jesus in this moment.

We need to have a place where we go to meet with God. When Jesus finished his final meal with the disciples, knowing it was just a few hours before his arrest, trial, and execution, he went to a place he had been many times before. Luke tells us: “Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives.” This was a place Jesus visited again and again in order to meet with God. Like Jesus, every one of us needs a place like that. In Matthew 6:6, Jesus said, “When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father.” The context of that passage is about secrecy and not praying to draw attention to yourself. There is a principle at work in Jesus’ wisdom: having a specific, routine place you go to in order to pray, a place that is easily accessible, a place without distraction, a place where you can go to meet with God.

When I was in college there was a five minute walk from my dorm to a bench overlooking Turkey Creek. Whenever I needed direction about a major decision, whenever I needed to process grief, whenever I felt like I needed an extended time to sit with God and give him thanks and praise, that’s where I went. For some people it’s the dining room table before the kids wake up, for others it’s their car. I have several friends who have literally turned a closet in their house into the place where they go to pray. They have five other closets to store stuff; they wanted to have one closet to meet with God. Right now, the place I meet with God is on walks. Keren knows that when I say, “I’m going on a short walk; I’ll be back in 30 minutes,” that means, “I need to be alone with God.” Make sure that in your rhythm and routine of life you have a place to go to be with the Lord.

We need our closest friends to be with us in our hour of need. Luke tells us, “His disciples followed him.” Even though Jesus was the Son of God in the flesh, when he was in the crucible, he wanted the people he was closest with to be near him. Like Jesus wanted his friends near to him when he was in need, we need our friends near to us. We have to reject the western myth of rugged individualism and embrace the reality of relational interdependence. Sometimes in pride we don’t want to let others in to see our weakness, or we don’t want to be vulnerable and let down our walls, but we were never meant to go through life, through seasons of difficulty and challenge, alone. James 5:16 says, “Pray for each other.” Galatians 6:2 says, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Proverbs 17:17 says, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity.” When we are in seasons of adversity and challenge, that’s when we need each other the most!

A bit over a week ago I was at the house with the kids and Keren was at a doctor's appointment. I noticed my phone ringing; Keren was FaceTiming me. I assumed she wanted to see the kids and make dinner plans for the evening. Instead, I saw my wife in a hospital bed and a gown, with tubes in her, hooked up to an IV. I learned that while Keren was at her regular doctor's appointment for the baby, her doctors became alarmed about a number of things, so they rushed her to the hospital to run tests on her, to make sure she and the baby were ok. What are you supposed to do in a moment like that?! I’m with my kids but my pregnant wife is in the hospital and her doctors don’t know what’s going on. First thing I did was call one of my closest friends who is a medical expert and asked for his advice. Then I called another one of my closest friends who could watch my kids. Then I texted about a dozen people and asked them to pray. By God’s grace, Keren and our baby boy are both fine. She’s on bed rest until the baby comes. But vitals and everything else look good. When we go through seasons of challenge, we need our closest friends to be with us in the hour of need.

We need to wrestle with God. Once Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane with his disciples, he asked them to pray and keep watch, and then we read, “He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed.” Yes, Jesus wanted his friends with him, but there was a conversation he needed to have with the Father, and they needed to have that conversation alone. It reminds of a story from the Old Testament with a man named Jacob. In Genesis 32 Jacob is traveling with his entire family and he sends

them on ahead of him, to the other side of a river, and then, as Jacob was all by himself and night fell, God came down, and Jacob and God wrestled all through the night. At the end of that evening two things happened. First, Jacob got a new name—from that point forward he is referred to as Israel, which means “one who has struggled with God.” Then, at the end of the wrestling, God touched Jacob’s hip, so from that point forward, he walked with a limp, a lasting physical reminder that he had wrestled with the Lord.

Sometimes in life there is business you have to do with God and God alone. No one can do it for you. I can’t do it for you. Your friends can’t do it for you. Your mom and grandma can’t do it for you. Your spouse can’t do it for you. You have to meet with him! You have to wrestle with him. When we go through the hardest things of life—the loss of a family member, the loss of a relationship or a marriage, addiction, depression, betrayal, isolation—some people want to try to go it alone, some people reach out for help and go through it with a few friends and a counselor, but the only way to really come through it is to meet with God in it. Something I have learned as a pastor is to never trust a leader with too much responsibility who doesn’t walk with a limp, who hasn’t met with God in the secret place, who doesn’t have the lasting marks on their life of having spent all night wrestling and struggling with the Lord. That’s what Jesus does with his heavenly father at this moment, and there are times in life where we have to do the same thing.

We need to boldly make our requests. As Jesus is on his knees, crying out in prayer, he tells God exactly what he wants: “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me.” In the fullness of Jesus becoming human, he didn’t want to suffer and die. Even though he wanted to save the world, he didn’t want to go through the mockery, the torture, the execution. So he asked his Father for another way. He wasn’t shy, he wasn’t intimidated, he wasn’t embarrassed to make his request; he didn’t feel like he needed to give God the Sunday School answer. He was vulnerable, honest, and real, which is exactly what God wants from us in prayer. Philippians 4:6 says, “In every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” Hebrews 4:16 says “Let us approach God’s throne of grace with confidence.” We need to come to God, let down our guard, and be 100% real with him. You never know how God is going to respond to the bold prayers of his people.

I remember one afternoon a few years ago getting up from my desk and walking around the parking lot of our church three times praying for God to provide for us in a time of financial need. “God, open up the floodgates.” “God, pour out your resources!” “God, this is the mission you’ve called us to, you’ve got to provide!” The next day—*the next day*—someone, entirely unsolicited, gave The Creek a six figure check. Six figures. I sat there looking at it, counted all the zeros, and sat dumbfounded yet again. God answers prayers. My sister-in-law suffered from a chronic illness for over ten years. Last year, almost her entire church gathered around her and prayed for her, and since that day she has been entirely cured. 100%. No symptoms. Her doctors don’t know what to tell her. Sometimes, when we boldly make our requests to God, he answers in ways beyond our ability to comprehend! But that also leads to the next point.

We need to trust God's sovereign plan, even when it's not what we want. Jesus not only prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me”; he concluded that request by saying, “Yet not my will, but yours be done.” This is one of the hardest realities in all of life, especially for people of faith, for people who know deep in their bones, in their heart of hearts, that there is a God, and that God is good and loving, that God cares about every detail of their lives. How could such a good and loving God allow things to happen to us that hurt so bad? How could he allow us to lose our job, or lose our house, or lose our health, or lose our marriage, or lose a child? How could he?! In many ways that is the ultimate test of faith. Sometimes our will and God’s sovereign will are not aligned. When that’s the case, when we have done everything we can do, when we have prayed every prayer we can pray, will we, like Jesus, be able to say: “*Your will be done*”? Even when the night is still pitch black and there is not a glimmer of light on the horizon, you are God, and even if I don’t understand why, I will trust in you.

I think about the people in Jeremiah's day in the Old Testament. They had just been defeated in war, ripped from their homes, and deported hundreds of miles away to the land of Babylon. Some people stood up and said, "I have a message from God: he has heard our cry and is going to rescue us! In a matter of months, our captors will be defeated and we'll return home, safe and sound." Then Jeremiah, the true prophet from God, stood up and said: "'Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,' declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 29:8-9). In other words, forget this health, wealth, and prosperity message these phony prophets have been peddling; that's not what's going to happen. Look what's next: "This is what the Lord says: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'" (Jeremiah 29:10-11).

This is the passage that people love to quote. This verse is written on walls and plaques; you can buy artwork at Hobby Lobby with this verse on it. Everyone loves to talk about God's plans for our hope and future, which of course is good and true and wonderful. But when was that plan going to be reality? In seventy years! Two entire generations spent in exile, then deliverance. It may not have made sense to everyone—those seventy years were filled with hardship and heartache—but what God did in his people during those seventy years prepared not only them, but the entire world, for Jesus Christ. They couldn't see it at the time; all they could see was their suffering, but God had a plan! Yes, it was a long term plan; yes, it was a plan that required a lot of trust, but it was a good plan, a plan that led to the salvation of the world. We learn from the Scriptures and we learn from Gethsemane that we can trust God's sovereign plan, even when it's not what we want.

And that leads to our final take away: **We need to know that God will sustain us in even the hardest seasons of life.** Jesus was in the midst of the greatest challenge during this earthly life, and after praying with his father and resigning himself to carry out the will of God, we are told: "An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him." Jesus was preparing to endure the hardest moment in all of human history, and God sent help from on high. The next 12 hours would be the most painful imaginable, but Jesus knew that he was not alone. So too in our lives, when we face our greatest challenges, we need to know that God is with us.

Psalm 23:4 says: "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." This is not some happy-go-lucky, "God is with me in the best of times," but rather, "In the hardest seasons of my entire life, when it feels like everyone else has abandoned me and I have no hope at all, even then I will not fear because I know God is with me." There was a time in the Apostle Paul's life when he went through great suffering. He prayed three times for God to take it away. Like Jesus he was bold in his request for deliverance. God said no, but no wasn't God's only response. Paul wrote: "The Lord said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" Even though Paul continued to suffer, God both met him in that suffering and turned it into something spectacular to the point that later on he wrote: "Now I boast in my weaknesses, because that is the very place that God meets me, and transforms that weakness into strength."

Every person I know who is in a deep place with God got there through meeting God in a Gethsemane moment. They wrestled with him through a long, dark season, they brought their request to him, and even when the answer was no, they trusted him and were sustained by him. No one says, "You know what really catapulted my faith and matured me? Those ten days in Hawaii were a game changer for my life." It's not the promotions and advancements and successes—it's the deep heartache and losses, where God meets us, that's where he does the greatest work. Because no matter how dark the valley, God is with us. We are never alone!