

WATCH AND PRAY

Matthew 26:36-46

THE SETTING

Matthew 26:36-37a

36 Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.”
37 And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee,
(Matthew 26:36-37a, 2022 LSB)

The word *Gethsemane* comes from the Hebrew and Aramaic word for “olive press.” The Mount of Olives was primarily known for the olive trees that grew on it. Gethsemane appears to have been an area where olives could be pressed and the oil extracted. John 18:1 says that it was a garden or an enclosed area. Luke 21:37 and John 18:2 say that Jesus and His disciples stayed there at night and used it as a gathering place.

Jesus had the larger group of disciples wait while He went to pray but took Peter, James, and John with Him to be witnesses of what took place.

THE LORD’S DISTRESS

Matthew 26:37-38

37 And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed.
38 Then He said to them, “My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me.”
(Matthew 26:37–38, 2022 LSB)

Jesus being grieved and distressed is a Jesus we have not seen before. In His humanity, His soul, He was deeply grieved, which has the idea of being utterly surrounded by grief. Taken together, these three words describe tremendous sorrow, unhappiness, mental and emotional agony, anxiety, and even despondency and hopelessness. Remember, Jesus was and is today One Person with two natures. On the one hand, He is Yahweh, the eternal God, who is pure Spirit. On the other hand, He is fully human, the Son of Mary, and flesh and bone.

As a Man, He suffered. As God, He knew exactly what He would suffer. First would come the actual moment of betrayal and arrest. Then would come several quick trials based on false charges. He would be rejected, insulted, mocked, physically assaulted, beaten, scourged, and ultimately, crucified.

What's more, He would bear the full brunt of Yahweh's righteous wrath against the elect for whom He died. He was pure, innocent, and undefiled (Hebrews 7:26), but God the Father would treat Him as though He were the worst sinner of all time (First Corinthians 5:21). God had patiently endured sinners and delayed judgment against His people (Romans 3:25), but the delay was over. For the sake of His justice, God's wrath had to be expressed and satisfied. For the sake of His lovingkindness, His wrath would not be poured out on those deserving it but on His own Son.

Philippians 2:8 says Jesus "humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Christ's obedience was not theoretical but actual. It was not a matter of mental agreement but real physical suffering. Sinners sleep well at night because they don't comprehend their guilt or the nature of judgment. Jesus was overwhelmed with the full terror and agony that every sinner would experience if they were conscious of their guilt and God's wrath.

He brought Peter, James, and John with Him to keep watch with Him. They weren't keeping watch for Judas; Jesus knew to the second when he would arrive with the soldiers. They were there to keep watch and witness His prayer so that they would be able to testify to it later on. What happens in the garden is crucial to rightly understanding the death of Jesus and our atonement.

THE CUP

Matthew 26:39

39 And He went a little beyond them,
and fell on His face and prayed, saying,
"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me;
yet not as I will, but as You will."
(Matthew 26:39, 2022 LSB)

Let's talk about "the cup." It's clearly a metaphor. Even if we only had the Gospels, it wouldn't be hard to understand that Jesus was talking about His coming suffering. But, praise God, we aren't limited to the Gospels. The Old Testament gives us a broader context.

For instance, Psalm 75:8 says,

8 For a cup is in the hand of Yahweh,
and the wine foams;
it is full of His mixture, and He pours from this;
surely all the wicked of the earth
must drain and drink down its dregs.
(Psalm 75:8, 2022 LSB)

The cup in Yahweh's hand is full of His wrath and judgment. All the wicked of the earth must drain it; His judgment will be poured out in its entirety. They will drink down the dregs. Wine in the ancient world was not well filtered, and there were always sediments at the bottom of the cup. To drink down the dregs means to completely empty the cup, down to the last drop. Once judgment begins, it will continue until God's wrath is satisfied.

Isaiah 51:17 says about God's judgment against Israel,

17 Awaken yourself! Awaken yourself!

Arise, **O Jerusalem,**

You who have drunk from the hand of Yahweh the cup of His wrath;

The chalice of reeling you have drained to the dregs.

(Isaiah 51:17, 2022 LSB)

Jeremiah 25:15 says regarding the Gentiles,

15 For thus Yahweh, the God of Israel, says to me,

“Take this cup of the wine of wrath from My hand

and cause **all the nations to whom I send you** to drink it.”

(Jeremiah 25:15, 2022 LSB)

Psalms 11:6 is an imprecatory prayer – a prayer for God to judge His enemies:

6 May He rain snares upon the wicked;

Fire and brimstone and burning wind will be the portion of their cup.

(Psalm 11:6, 2022 LSB)

The cup is not just an Old Testament metaphor; it is also found in the book of Revelation:

9 Then another angel, a third one, followed them,

saying with a loud voice, “If anyone worships the beast and his image,

and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand,

10 he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God,

which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His rage,

and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone

in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.”

(Revelation 14:9–10, 2022 LSB)

The cup prays about is not just a taste of suffering but the fullness of Yahweh's holy judgment against the elect. He would die as a substitute for sinners, just as the Passover lamb died in the place of the Israelites in Egypt. When Jesus died, “darkness fell upon all the land” for three hours (Matthew 27:45). At the end of

that darkness, Jesus cried out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” The sin He bore had separated Him from the Father. He bore that separation for three interminable hours until the wrath of God was satisfied. We don’t know what the Father said to Him in answer to that prayer, but we do know that shortly after,

46 Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said,
“Father, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT.”
 Having said this, He breathed His last.
(Luke 23:46, 2022 LSB)

In the song *How Deep The Father’s Love For Us* we sing, “How great the pain of searing loss! The Father turns His face away.” That is the cup that Jesus had before Him that night.

JESUS PRAYS

Matthew 26:39, 42, 44

Jesus prayed three times.

39 And He went a little beyond them,
 and fell on His face and prayed, saying,
 “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me;
 yet not as I will, but as You will.”
(Matthew 26:39, 2022 LSB)

42 He went away again a second time and prayed, saying,
 “My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it,
 Your will be done.”
(Matthew 26:42, 2022 LSB)

44 And He left them again,
 and went away and prayed a third time,
 saying the same thing once more.
(Matthew 26:44, 2022 LSB)

It’s clear that He wants Peter, James, and John to witness His prayers so they would be able to *bear* witness to His prayers. But it’s also clear that Jesus doesn’t say to them, “Hey, guys, let’s pray,” and grab their hands. This is His time before the Father.

We see Jesus fall on His face in a posture of humility and submission to the Father. At no other time does Jesus bow this way. The devil wanted Him in this humble and submissive posture, but Jesus refused:

8 Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory;
9 and he said to Him,
 “All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me.”
10 Then Jesus said to him, “Go, Satan! For it is written,
 ‘YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD, AND SERVE HIM ONLY.’”
 (Matthew 4:8–10, 2022 LSB)

Neither did Jesus ever bow before human leaders.

But He bowed before His Father, humble and submissive.

Pay close attention to Jesus’ prayer. He is not asking God to take away the cup; if He were, He would have said, “My Father, let this cup pass from Me.” Through this prayer Jesus is establishing the unquestionable necessity of His cross.

In this first prayer, Jesus asks whether it is possible to atone for sin by any means other than His cross. The answer is no, and Jesus submits to the Father’s will.

In His second prayer, Jesus asks if God’s judgment will remain until He satisfies it. The answer is yes, and Jesus again submits to the Father’s will.

In His third prayer, Jesus repeats the first two. We don’t know the exact wording, but the intention was the same.

Was there any other way? No.

Would God’s judgment remain until Jesus took it away? Yes.

Each time Jesus submitted Himself to the will of God: “Your will be done.”

There was no other way to atone for the sins of God’s people. God’s wrath against them would not pass away unless Jesus drank it. And if Jesus drank it, He would drink it all, down to the dregs, down to the last drop. God’s judgment would not be pacified or mollified or soothed or calmed down until a later time. It would be poured out in its entirety against the Lord Jesus. The cup of God’s people would be drunk to the last drop and never be filled with judgment again.

THE DISCIPLES

Matthew 26:40, 43, 45a

40 And He came to the disciples
and found them sleeping,
and said to Peter,

“So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour?

41 Keep watching and praying
[so] that you may not enter into temptation;
the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

(Matthew 26:40–41, 2022 LSB)

43 And again He came and found them sleeping,
for their eyes were heavy.

(Matthew 26:43, 2022 LSB)

45 Then He came to the disciples and said to them,

“Are you still sleeping and resting?

(Matthew 26:45a, 2022 LSB)

Peter, James, and John were exhausted. It was well after midnight. Jesus wanted them to keep watch with Him, and perhaps they did for a time. But the late hour and their fatigue caught up with them, and they drifted off to sleep.

If you remember from last week, in Matthew 26:33, Peter said, “Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.” In Matthew 26:35, Peter said, “Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You.” The other disciples said the same thing. Even if everyone else falls away at some future point, I won’t. Even if I have to die with You at some future point, I will not deny You.

Peter probably didn’t realize that the future was so very close. Those hours in the garden were the future. He promised to never fall away. He promised to die with Jesus if it came to that. But when it came right down to it, Peter dozed off with James and John. “I’ll die with You!” He couldn’t even dominate his own fatigue and stay awake. I don’t say this to criticize Peter; I would have a hard time, too.

But we should recognize that our elaborate promises to the Lord Jesus don’t fool Him. No matter how much we mean our words when we say them, we are often unable to follow through. Only God’s words never fail. Only God can say with certainty that He will or won’t do something. Jesus even said in Matthew 5:34-37,

34 “But I say to you, make no oath at all,
either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,
35 or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet,
or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING.

36 Nor shall you make an oath by your head,
for you cannot make one hair white or black.
37 But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’;
anything beyond these is of the evil one.”
(**Matthew 5:34–37, 2022 LSB**)

Only Yahweh can fulfill every promise because He only promises what He has decreed, and none of His decrees fail.

BRINGING IT HOME

As we bring this home to our lives today, I want to focus mainly on Jesus’ command to “keep watching and praying.”

The Cup

Before I do, though, I want to remind you that the cup that Jesus drank had the names of His people written on it. That was MY cross He died on. That was MY cup of judgment that He drank. If your faith is in Jesus Christ alone, then you can be certain that Jesus Christ drank the cup of wrath with your name on it. It is empty and will never again be refilled. And you can also be certain that you have received His cup of blessing. That is the cup of the New Covenant in His blood (Matthew 26:28). That is the cup of Psalm 23:5 that overflows with blessing and abundant life. That cup, which was His, is now yours too.

Keep Watching and Praying

Now, Jesus commanded His disciples to “keep watching and praying.” It was, first of all, a unique command for that time and for those men. But we are frequently urged to be alert and on guard. “Devote yourselves to prayer,” Colossians 4:2 says, “being watchful in it with thanksgiving.” “So then, let us not sleep as others do,” First Thessalonians 5:6 says, “but let us be awake and sober.” Concerning false teachers, Paul in Acts 20:31 urged the elders of the Ephesian church to “be watchful, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.” “Be of sober spirit, be watchful,” First Peter 5:8 says. “Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”

Keeping watch means being awake, alert, and aware of what’s going on around us. It means being on guard and vigilant, having situational awareness. We are to close our eyes to the world around us but to see it carefully and anticipate what might happen next.

Paul urged the Corinthians,

13 Be watchful,
stand firm in the faith,
act like men [as opposed to children, so like adults],
be strong.
(1 Corinthians 16:13, 2022 LSB)

- We are to be ready for the attacks of the enemy (First Peter 5:8).
- We are to be ready to serve (Galatians 5:13).
- We are to be ready to give an answer to those who want to know the reason for our hope (First Peter 3:15).
- We are to be ready with the Gospel (Ephesians 6:15).
- We are to be ready to confess and repent (First John 1:9).
- We are to be ready for every good work (Titus 3:1).
- We are to be ready to suffer for the Lord's glory (Second Corinthians 4:10).

None of this is to be done on our own or for our own ends. We are not only to *keep watch* but to *pray* so that we may live as the Lord Jesus did, with an attitude of humility and submission to the Father's will and purposes. As **keeping watch** is the work of a soldier, **praying** is the act of a servant. Prayer is how we deliberately orient ourselves Christward. It is how we align ourselves with the will of God. That's why we are to pray "if it is Your will." As faithful servants of the Lord, we are not trying to get Him to follow our lead but trying to get our hearts and minds in agreement with His purposes. We are to be servant-soldiers, maintaining our alertness and situational awareness while also bowing our hearts and minds to the will of our God so that we are truly and properly ready for what comes.