
Predictions and Prayers

Matthew 26:30-46

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A quiet meal together to celebrate an ancient Jewish feast. A stunning prediction of betrayal and shocked responses around the disciples. A moment, in a friend's home, in the midst of the meal, the change from the Old to the New is incarnated through the symbol of bread and wine. Wonder... surprise... Questions... Rising concern heading into fear... Quiet resolution... And a song...

³⁰ And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Before going to Gethsemane, they sing the Hallel from Psalm 113-118. Here is a portion of what may have been sung.

Psalm 113:1-3

113 Praise the Lord!

Praise, O servants of the Lord,
praise the name of the Lord!

² Blessed be the name of the Lord
from this time forth and forevermore!

³ From the rising of the sun to its setting,
the name of the Lord is to be praised!

And the most poignant, the most prophetic of them...

Psalm 116:1-19

116 I love the Lord, because he has heard
my voice and my pleas for mercy.

² Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

³ The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish.

⁴ Then I called on the name of the Lord:
"O Lord, I pray, deliver my soul!"

⁵ Gracious is the Lord, and righteous;
our God is merciful.

⁶ The Lord preserves the simple;
when I was brought low, he saved me.

⁷ Return, O my soul, to your rest;
for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.

⁸ For you have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling;

⁹ I will walk before the Lord
in the land of the living.
¹⁰ I believed, even when I spoke:
“I am greatly afflicted”;
¹¹ I said in my alarm, “All mankind are liars.”
¹² What shall I render to the Lord
for all his benefits to me?
¹³ I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the Lord,
¹⁴ I will pay my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people.
¹⁵ Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his saints.
¹⁶ O Lord, I am your servant;
I am your servant, the son of your maidservant.
You have loosed my bonds.
¹⁷ I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving
and call on the name of the Lord.
¹⁸ I will pay my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people,
¹⁹ in the courts of the house of the Lord,
in your midst, O Jerusalem.
Praise the Lord!

Psalm 118:19–29

¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the Lord.
²⁰ This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.
²¹ I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
²² The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.
²³ This is the Lord’s doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.
²⁴ This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
²⁵ Save us, we pray, O Lord!
O Lord, we pray, give us success!
²⁶ Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!
We bless you from the house of the Lord.
²⁷ The Lord is God,
and he has made his light to shine upon us.

Bind the festal sacrifice with cords,
up to the horns of the altar!

²⁸ You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God; I will extol you.

²⁹ Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever!

With these words ringing in their ears and hearts, the Lord and His disciples head out across the Kidron Valley heading toward the Mount of Olives and enter the Garden of Gethsemane.

The Disciples Faithfulness Challenged (v.31-35)

As they walk along under the light of an April moon possibly carrying torches to light their way, Jesus stops, looks them in the eye and speaks these words.

³¹ Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' ³² But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." ³³ Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." ³⁴ Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." ³⁵ Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And all the disciples said the same.

Its Sad Prediction (v.31a)

Jesus' sad prediction is that the disciples will "fall away" this very night. They will leave Him. Even though they are disciples, they will flee in fear. They will fall away from Him.

This is interesting word for Matthew to use because it is consistent with the "fall away" language of the rest of the New Testament. The word is used to speak of those who, having professed faith, then abandon their profession and "fall away". It also allows a use of the word to refer to true believers who, in a moment of intense persecution and overwhelming fear, may walk away from Jesus for a short time. It is what the disciples did. We are warned of the dreadful danger of falling away. In being warned of it, we are therefore fortified against it.

Simple question: the disciples will fall away from Jesus; were they lost? Did they lose their salvation? No. But they all returned and followed Him faithfully. They received the empowerment of the Spirit at Pentecost. And all of them died a martyr's death, faithful to the end.

Its Scripture Roots (v.31b)

Jesus is basing His prediction on a text of Scripture. The quote here is from Zecharia 13:7.

"Awake, O sword, against my shepherd,
against the man who stands next to me,"
declares the LORD of hosts.

"Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered;
I will turn my hand against the little ones.

Therefore, once again, Jesus is fulfilling the Old Testament even in the desertion by the disciples. The shepherd will be struck by the religious leaders, the Jewish people, the Roman government and put to death. In that moment of being delivered up, the sheep will be scattered. The disciples will be scattered. This is what the Bible predicted. It is exactly what happened.

Its Sure Promise (v.32)

Jesus reassures them with a promise. Jesus will meet them and lead after His resurrection. While this is cryptic it is also clear. Jesus intended it to be a comfort. They may leave him. They may desert and even deny Him. But even in His death and resurrection, Jesus will gather them and go before them. What is coming is not an end; it is a beginning.

Its Shocked Denial (v.33)

The disciples are once again shocked. We do not know if any had marked the absence of Judas. But certainly, they were intending to stick with Jesus no matter what. But Peter speaks up. His affirmation is both honorable, but filled with self-assurance. There almost seems to be a desire to distinguish himself from the other disciples. It is almost as if he said, "I don't care what anybody or everybody is going to do, I will not deny nor desert you in your time of need." Jesus can depend on Peter to stay faithfully by His side...

Its Stark Pronouncement (v.34)

³⁴ Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times."

Here is that phrase that precedes and undeniable truth. You can almost see Jesus leaning into Peter as he stands before Jesus. This is the truth. Peter, tonight, before the morning comes, even before the rooster crows, you will deny your Lord three times. The cock crows was an idiom expressing the early morning when the sun rose and a new day will dawn. In the darkness of this very night, before the dawn, Peter would deny the Lord. It would be so the denial and the crowing rooster as hard as it may be to imagine.

Its Sacrificial Declaration (v.33)

"To the death we will follow you," Peter asserts.

The Germans have a great word for what we feel in these moments when Peter speaks up. It is, "Fremdschämen." This is the embarrassment we feel on behalf of the actions of some we do not know. "No Peter, don't do it... Don't do... Ah, Peter, you did it. You spoke when you shouldn't..."

Yes, these assertions are understandable from those who have followed Jesus and have loved Him. They have given up much for Him. But Peter has not understood the cross nor the full cost of discipleship. He has at times argued with and admonished Jesus. And now, in the the darkness, after a supper and a song, after sad quiet words of prediction, Peter once again leads the disciples to admirable but misguided assertions. This may be their heart; but that is not what Jesus is telling them.

The Lord's Prayers Offered (v.36-45)

Their walk brings them a garden known as Gethsemane. It is late in the evening now and the time is growing near. Jesus' heart is growing heavy.

³⁶ 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.

Its Inner Circle (v.36-37)

He tells all the disciples to wait and watch while He goes to pray. They are instructed to sit while He has a moment of prayer alone. He knows it is getting late. They are tired. They have had a long day of preparation and participation in the Passover meal. Now that has been followed by a walk. "Sit here. Rest here...."

He takes Peter, James and John with Him. Why? What is the point? What follows and its record in the gospels would be an embarrassing moment for those who just said they would never desert nor deny... You can't even keep awake during a simple prayer.

Its Sorrowing Heart (v.38)

Jesus is anticipating what is about to take place. Many have faced the same sort of physical torture and pain as Jesus did. It is terrible to contemplate. It is almost impossible for us to appreciate. But what seems to be weighing on Jesus is the anticipation of the Father's wrath, those hours of separation from the Father.

He asks Peter, James and John to watch with Him. This means, to stay awake and stay on the alert. The word is used of a soldier on picket duty who must "watch". Stay awake. Be on guard.

Its Simple Petitions (v.39-44)

One write helps as we think about these simple petitions.

"Jesus prayed with a clear objective, which all his humanity longed for; but above even that, he wanted God the Father's will to be done. For prayer is not seeking to manipulate God. It is opening up to God. It is welcoming the 'good, pleasing and perfect will' of God. That is the difference between prayer and magic. Magic seeks to control cosmic powers. Prayer seeks to surrender to the will of God." [Green, p.279]

They were earnest...

Lying on His face, Jesus earnestly, deeply, powerfully, even with loud cries Hebrews tells us, petitioned the Father. In His humanity, the wrestling was real. In His humanity, Jesus prayed with fervency.

We are hereby encouraged to earnest, fervent, even passionate praying about what deeply concerns and affects us.

They were repeated...

He prayed three times the same or similar prayers. After the first period of prayer, Jesus went back two more times to ask the same thing. It seems that the Apostle Paul saw this as a pattern or permission to pray three times to request something, namely, that his thorn be removed (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

We are hereby allowed to bring our requests more than once, not to try to persuade God, but to express our desires to the Father who desires to hear them.

They were pointed...

Prays to a Father which is the consistent pattern of the New Testament. Jesus not only prays to God as His Father, but leaves us the pattern in His teaching on Prayer that we are addressing a specific person of the Godhead. Multiple times in the New Testament, Paul speaks of praying to the Father, bowing knees to the Father and requesting from the Father.

Asks clearly and specifically for the "cup to pass." We know what cup this is. This is the cup from the Passover supper. This is the cup of suffering an outpoured life. This is the cup of death. This the cup of the Father's wrath.

It is likely that Matthew is summarizing the prayer in these words. This was the subject of Jesus' praying. Hebrews seems to indicate that there was more said than these words. But Matthew is clear that Jesus was asking the Father, if possible, to allow Jesus to not go through the suffering planned.

We are hereby encouraged to pray our hearts, our needs and even our desires.

They were submitted...

Though Jesus is passionate and pointed in what He requests, He is also submitted to the Father's will. This is not an "escape" clause. This is not a way to ask on one hand and take back with another. To pray *any other way* is presumption and sin. We are not trying to get God to do our will. We cannot and we should not try to manipulate God. God, this is what I ask of you and God, I will happily and humbly submit to what your will is and proves to be.

We are hereby encouraged to pray, not with demanding words, but in a submissive way.

They were unanswered...

In the sense that we say answered prayer is one that God does what is requested. Unanswered prayer is one that God does not do what is requested. Here is the deep and difficult mystery of prayer. Even Jesus could, with all His soul and voice, ask for something that He deeply wanted. But being submitted to the Father's will kept the prayer from being presumptuous or worse.

In Hebrews we are told that Jesus 'offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission'. This was all a part of the reality of His humanity.

Its Sleeping Disciples (v.40-41, 42)

Twice Jesus goes back to the three to find them sleeping.

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."

Now we know how long Jesus was expected to pray. Could they not have stayed awake for one hour? They who would die for Jesus if necessary, could not stay awake for Jesus for an hour. Were they tired? Yes, verse 42 says so. Their eyes were heavy. But their Lord was sad, struggling, suffering in the contemplation of the cross.

But Jesus turns the whole thing on its head. They needed to stay awake and pray, pray for themselves. Why do I say that? Because they were about to enter into temptation and were ill prepared to handle it.

With supreme irony, Jesus admonishes them, not just for this unwatchful, sleepy-headed moment, but also for their strong denials and affirmations of faithfulness. Yes indeed. The inner man is strong, willing and desires of what is right. The spirit wants to affirm and assert... But the flesh is weak, unable, unwilling and even, mastering. This is the long hard struggle for many Christians. At so many points in your lives you really want to serve the Lord, to be more faithful, to sacrifice more. But alas, it is cold. It is snowing, I stayed up too late. It is inconvenient. It is tiring. It is... You see? We are often ready to do the big thing, but struggle with grind, the just every day, every week, every month faithfulness.

Its Striking End (v.45)

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."

Jesus wakes everyone up. Wake up. Get up. You can get your rest and sleep later. Now? It is almost time. The betrayal is about to take place. Let's go. Judas is on his way.

Reflect and Respond

What can we learn about self-assured boasting?

- It is self-deceiving and dangerous...
- It requires repentance and humility...
- It will be challenged by the circumstances God's providences bring...
- What can we learn about praying?
- We should pray when trouble comes.
- We can pray about the same thing multiple times.
- We can ask for change in our circumstances.
- We must be prepared to submit to God's will.
- Gathering up lots of people praying for something is something we can do but frankly has no affect on God.

"Jesus is alone. Neglected, misunderstood or betrayed by his friends, and later deserted (56), he faces the cross willingly (but at such cost). The sins of the world, ours included, cut him off like an obscene storm-cloud from the sunshine of his Father's presence. He tasted the hell of separation from God the Father as he hung on that cross. And in the Garden he got the first bitter taste of what our salvation was going to cost. The outcome he must face alone." (Greene, p.290)

Do you hear the words of our Lord? May you take them to heart.