

The Remedy for Weak Flesh

The Cross (Part 7)

Mark 14:27-42 (Mt.26:31-46; Lk.22:31-46; Jn.13:36-38) 7/9/2022

*Jesus said the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Does that mean we're doomed to failure because of weak flesh?
No. Jesus gave us a remedy.*

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Mark 14:27 "You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' 28 But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

29 Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not."

30 "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "today-- yes, tonight-- before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times."

31 But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same.

32 They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray."

33 He took Peter, James and John along with him,

and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. 34 "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them.

"Stay here and keep watch." 35 Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. 36 "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

37 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? 38 Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

39 Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. 40 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.

41 Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. 42 Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

Introduction: The Battle

The Garden of Gethsemane is the site of a massive spiritual battle—probably the fiercest ever fought.

Mark 14:42 Rise! Let us go!

That was the language they used to lead soldiers into battle. Jesus says, "Forward, march!" and leads them right into the teeth of not just a spiritual battle, but a physical one. Things are about to get violent.

And if we freeze the frame here in this moment when Jesus gives the order to advance into battle, look at the soldiers he's leading. They're half asleep. Can you imagine being a general and telling your men for months, "Get ready—make sure you're prepared for the battle. It will be the worst you've ever faced. Practice with your sword, make sure you get some protein for breakfast, read up on our strategy manual, *be ready!* And when the moment arrives, you round up your men, and they're all groggy stumbling around in a daze, none of them have their armor or swords. And you just sigh and say, "It's time. Let's go." That's what Jesus is facing here when he says, "Rise, let us go."

They meet the enemy, the battle begins, and in the opening moments of the war, every one of the disciples fall. Jesus' entire army collapses the moment the battle begins.

Jesus, on the other hand, doesn't even flinch. He stands tall and doesn't so much as back up a single step. He never falters the slightest bit in this war.

Today's passage is the story of how it came to that point. It's the story of how the disciples ended up going to war so weak, and how Jesus went in so strong. When you see Jesus standing there on trial, silent, poised, unflinching—you can hardly imagine this is the same person who was such a mess hours

earlier in the garden —crying, wailing, falling to the ground, desperate, sweating blood, trying to find a way out. It doesn't even seem like the same man. And when you look at the cowardly disciples all deserting and running for their lives, you can hardly imagine those are the same men who were so strong and resolved the night before.

The disciples were strong in the garden and fell in the battle, and Jesus was weak in the garden and stood strong in the battle —Mark is going to show us exactly how both of those came to be. So let's back up to verse 27 so we can see how Mark sets the table. The setup is important.

The disciples' failure and the reasons behind it are spelled out so clearly, there's no question Mark's purpose is to teach us how to avoid the same failure. And we'll learn these principles twice—first by watching the disciples do it wrong, then by seeing Jesus do it right.

Overconfidence

Mark 14:27 "You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written: "'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' 28 But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

How Should They Have Responded?

How should they have responded to that? Affirm it? "We're going to deny you? Sure thing Lord—whatever you say." That doesn't seem quite right.

Maybe ask him how it could be avoided, or how they can recover afterward, or ask about to say more about him rising and regathering them in Galilee? I'm not sure what the best response would be, but I think I have a pretty good idea what the worst possible response is.

29 Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not."

Not only does he flatly contradict Jesus, but he does so by elevating himself above everyone else—the very thing Jesus has been laboring to teach them not to do. "Don't seek greatness by exalting yourself above others."

But Peter can't help it. Jesus says, "You'll all fall away!" Peter looks around, "Yeah, I can see *them* falling away. But not me. I'm superman." After all that arguing about who was the greatest, Peter finally figured it out. It was him.

This response to Jesus saying they would fall away reveals the reason they would fall away. Overconfidence. Overconfidence was a sedative that them fast asleep spiritually. Peter just could not imagine he could ever be capable of such a horrible sin—the worst sin there is—directly denying Christ. Peter's thinking, "I have my faults. By *that sin*? No way."

Our Overconfidence

If there's any sin you think you're incapable of committing—murder, child molestation, fill in the blank—if you think there's some depth to which you could never descend, congratulations. You're right there with Peter. You're saying exactly what he said. "Others might commit that sin, but not me."

Spirit and Flesh

We Are Overconfident Because of too much Focus on the Willingness of the Spirit and not Enough on the Weakness of the Flesh

Why do we think this way? Given our past track record, how could any of us ever have an overconfidence problem? The Rockies don't have a problem with overconfidence, sitting dead last in the NL West. They aren't sitting around the clubhouse saying, "No need to practice. I'm sure we'll win the World Series this year." When we look at our past, what do we see? Is it like David with his exploits—

winning victories every time he goes out? Not me. With all the times we've failed even the easiest of tests, what makes us think we're going to dominate from here on out?

Jesus gives us insight into that in verse 38.

38 ... The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

We get overconfident because right here and now, our spirit is 100% on board with doing the right thing. Our spirit is willing, and we all have Alzheimer's when it comes to how weak our flesh is at carrying out all our wonderful plans. We let the willingness of our spirit lull us into thinking we're safe.

Spirit vs. Flesh

Last time I talked about how we have competing wills—one that acts on impulse like an animal, and one that can see the bigger picture. The part of you that wants to act on feelings—that's the flesh. The part that says no to immediate impulses to reach a higher goal—that's your spirit.

And your spirit has all kinds of marvelous plans for your life, doesn't it? Imagine how great your life would be like if you followed through on every good thing your spirit planned. You'd have the body of an Olympic athlete. Your character flaws would all be long gone. You'd be a prayer warrior, a Bible scholar, and evangelist. Our spirits are willing and eager to do all kinds of great things.

But your spirit doesn't have any arms or legs. The only way to get any of it does is to get your flesh on board. And we miscalculate how hard that's going to be.

The Importance of a Willing Spirit

Now, that's not to say a willing spirit is unimportant. When Peter said he was willing to die with Jesus, he meant it. You can see that when he draws his sword on the whole crowd and starts swinging. His spirit really was willing.

And that was good. By itself, it's not enough for victory, but never discount how important it is for your spirit to be willing. A willing spirit was the difference between the eleven and Judas. The eleven failed under pressure; Judas' defection was premeditated. That's far worse.

So it was good that their spirits were willing. In fact, without a spirit that's willing to die for Christ, you can't even be saved.

Mark 8:34 If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it.

If you're not willing right now, to die for Christ, you're not a Christian.

How will that pan out in the time of testing? That's another question—it depends on your flesh. But unless you have the full intention and willingness right now to give your life for Christ, you're not a believer.

And even as a believer, it's possible for your willingness to fade. In David's famous prayer of repentance he says this:

Psalm 51:12 ... grant me a willing spirit.

He knew his willing spirit wasn't even reliable going forward—like the next time he saw a beautiful woman. You can get so caught up in a sin that your spirit isn't even willing to take the steps it can take, like ending a relationship or changing your routine or getting accountability or counseling or reading a book or whatever.

Spirit Problem or Flesh Problem?

It's good to keep these two aspects in mind when you're diagnosing any sin problem. Is this a willingness issue, or a flesh problem?

A lot of times parents fail to make this distinction—especially with teenagers. They correct their kids as if they had a spirit problem when in reality it's a flesh problem. Unlike Jesus, they don't acknowledge a willing spirit. Dad is going off to his son about how he needs to be committed to doing the right thing, and in reality, the kid already is. He wants to do the right thing. His spirit already is willing. The reason he keeps failing is he just doesn't know how to get a handle on his flesh. He doesn't need a lecture on willingness; he needs instruction on how to deal with the flesh.

Or on the other side—someone's in a sin and you give him tips on how to strengthen the flesh, but the real problem is that his spirit is unwilling. Any time you make the wrong diagnosis, you're going to give the wrong remedy.

Whether we're counseling our kids or friends or diagnosing our own spiritual problems, the starting point is to discern—is this a spirit problem or a flesh problem?

Jesus teaches us to do that when he does for the disciples in v.38. "For you guys, it's a flesh problem. That's why you're headed for failure."

The Solution for Weak Flesh

No Excuses

So in the disciples' case, it wasn't a spirit problem; it was a flesh problem. So is that an excuse? "You know how it is Jesus—we're only human. You said it yourself—the flesh is weak." Is that an excuse? Look down at v.40 where Jesus returns the second time.

40 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.

That's the same thing that happened at Jesus' transfiguration when God spoke from heaven. It says these same three guys did not know what to say. But on that occasion, even though he didn't know what to say, Peter said something anyway. But not this time. They're silent. And so is Jesus. Maybe he had a tear in his eye, a shake of his head—Mark doesn't say. All he says is Jesus walked away. He doesn't say, "Aw, don't sweat it guys. You're tired, the flesh is weak—I get it." Nothing like that. He just goes back to his place of prayer.

No one speaks because they all know there is no excuse. Weak flesh is no excuse because the first time Jesus came back he gave them the remedy for weak flesh.

When we fail because of weak flesh, we can very quickly swing from overconfidence to defeatism. We go from, "I would never fall in that way" to "Ugh. I'm hopeless. This battle is impossible. My flesh is so weak, I'm just doomed to failure."

But we're not doomed to failure, and weak flesh isn't an excuse because Jesus gave us the remedy for weak flesh. Jesus had weak flesh too, but he didn't fall. Why? Because he followed his own prescription for dealing with weak flesh.

What can you do to strengthen the flesh so you don't fall to temptation?

38 Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

The problem of weak flesh can be overcome if you just do these two things: watch and pray.

Watch

We'll start with watching. This whole incident begins with Jesus telling them exactly what they need to do to win this battle.

34 keep watch.

Now, it's important to understand—everything in this passage about alertness, wakefulness, and sleep has a dual meaning—physical and spiritual.¹ At one level, “Keep watch,” means to physically stand guard. “Have my back while I’m praying. If Judas arrives, I want a heads up.”

At a deeper level, he wants them to stay awake and alert spiritually so they don’t fall to temptation. That’s clear from v.38—Watch and pray so you don’t fall into temptation.

So how did they do? They failed at both.

37 He returned and found them sleeping.

And we’ll see in this passage that the physical and spiritual are connected. In order to stay awake spiritually, you have to pray. And to pray, you have to stay awake physically.

But the disciples fall asleep physically, and as a result, they aren’t prepared spiritually. Remember how Jesus ended his sermon about the Second Coming? “Don’t let the Son of man return and find you sleeping.” Look at v.37.

37 He returned and found them sleeping.

40 Again he returned and found them sleeping.

The exact same phrase in the Greek as in the Olivet Discourse. So the disciples’ failure in Gethsemane is ominous because it shows the disciples didn’t have what’s needed to persevere. If this were the final tribulation, the disciples wouldn’t make it. That’s pretty serious for the men Jesus had selected to be the foundation stones of the Church.

And it’s a strong warning to anyone who reads the book of Mark—whatever you do, make sure you do not make the same mistake they made in Gethsemane. Stay awake. Be alert. Be alert to the danger and be alert to your own weakness. The disciples were oblivious to both.

Understand Your Weakness

We already saw how unaware they were of their own weakness. There are two ways to wake up to the reality of how weak your flesh is—the easy way and the hard way. The easy way is to believe what Jesus said. The hard way is to suffer a catastrophic spiritual failure, like the disciples.

Think of a kid on the high school football team who has so much potential to be a great player, but right now he’s not because he thinks he’s already a great player, so he doesn’t bother lifting weights or doing any training. The coach tries to tell him, “You’re not as tough as you think you are. Trust me.” But the kid won’t listen. And finally the coach has to tell the linebacker, “I want you to go out there and flatten that kid.” BAM! The kid’s on his back seeing stars. Next morning, that kid’s in the weight room. The coach says, “Good. Now I can make you into the kind of player you thought you already were.”

Did Jesus eventually manage to make the disciples strong? Yes. They all suffered and died for Christ. Their courage in the book of Acts is legendary. But the process of making them that strong couldn’t start until they got flattened in Gethsemane.

God says, “Darrell, I can make you into the man you think you already are. I’ll do it, but the process can’t begin until you face the fact that you’re not that man yet. Should we do this the easy way or the hard way?”

You’re the Worst, not the Best

In vv.27-30 Jesus is trying to do it the easy way for the disciples. He tells them, “You’re all going to fall away.” Peter says, “Not me—I’m stronger than everyone else.” He thinks he’s better than them.

¹ I draw this conclusion from the fact that Jesus takes his language about watchfulness and sleep from the Olivet Discourse, where it’s clearly about spiritual alertness, and applies it here in the garden to a situation where the disciples fell asleep physically. The dual application is especially clear in vv.37-38, where Jesus fuses together the problem of their physical sleep with the spiritual issue of falling to temptation.

And Jesus says, “No, Peter, you’re not the best of the eleven. You’re the worst.” No one will fall as hard as you, Peter.

30 "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "today-- yes, tonight-- before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times."

Everything in that sentence is emphatic in the Greek. The way Jesus states this, just put the whole sentence in all caps—especially the word “disown.”² Mark my words Peter—yours will be the worst failure of all. “Peter, you’re not the best—you’re the worst” And that’s not Jesus being mean; it’s Jesus trying to let Peter out the easy way. He even gives Peter an alarm clock reminder that will go off twice. The rooster.

Peter Insists on the Hard Way

But Peter won’t learn the easy way. All he does is raise his overconfidence another octave. Jesus said, “You’ll deny me three times.”

31 But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same.

This is the downside of being a natural born leader. When you fail, everyone around you will follow.

Peter boasted the loudest about how he would never fail, so when Jesus returns and finds them all sleeping, guess who Jesus singles out.

37 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour?"

He calls Peter by his old name because he’s acting like his old self.³ But it’s not too late for Peter and the others to learn the easy way. They already failed, but Jesus wakes them up and gives them another chance.

38 Watch and pray⁴ so that you will not fall into temptation.⁵

The Unknown Self

But they still don’t learn. They thought they knew themselves better than Jesus knew them. We’re the same way. We think we know ourselves, but do we? How much do you really know about your strength or weakness? Think of the thousands of ways you’ve never been tested. We have no idea how we would respond in a multitude of different circumstances. But we think we know ourselves, and that’s why instead of getting desperate enough to take Jesus’ remedy for weak flesh, we just relax and drift off to sleep.

² See Matthew 10:32–33 and Luke 12:8–9. The word “disown” receives the strongest emphasis. Jesus holds it to the very end so it’s the last word of the sentence.

³ Peter is called Simon four times in chapter 1 (1:16, 29, 30, 36). Jesus gives him the name Peter in 3:16, and after that he’s always Peter except here, where Mark still calls him Peter but Jesus calls him Simon.

⁴ These verbs are plural. After singling out Peter in v.37, now he speaks to all three.

⁵ Temptation to do what? Usually we think of a temptation as some enticing pleasure. But here the temptation is to save their lives. Jesus had taught them that whoever tries to save his life will lose it. They are about to be tempted to do that very thing. And angry mob with swords and clubs is going to show up soon. And they’ll have to decide—do I try to save my life, or do I stay with Jesus even when they have him in cuffs? In the Olivet Discourse he told them they would be flogged in synagogues and stand before governors and kings as Jesus’ witnesses (Mk.13:9). This is their first opportunity to do that, and they totally miss it.

Don’t just think of temptation as an enticement to pleasure. Temptation is any impulse to step outside of God’s will.

Take Danger Seriously

So, they were oblivious to the reality of how weak they were, and they were also oblivious to the threat they were facing. Jesus told them about the danger, but they really didn't believe it until saw it with their own eyes—when the mob came. But by then it was too late.

Do you think if Peter could have looked ahead several hours and seen the agony he would be in because of his failure —do you think if he could feel that pain for a moment he would take this situation a little more seriously?

What the disciples failed to realize was this battle would be lost or won in Gethsemane, not Golgotha. It was what happened the night before in preparation that determined the outcome in the morning. The disciples had already lost the battle before the mob ever arrived because they didn't take the threat seriously until they could see it.

They were fooled by the apparent peacefulness of the garden. Very often people will point to “a sense of peace” as proof they are following God's guidance. “I have a real peace about this decision.” In Gethsemane, there were 11 guys who had a deep sense of peace, and one guy who was in absolute turmoil. And the one in turmoil was the only one following God's will. Don't be lulled to sleep by what seems like peace in situations the Bible says are fraught with spiritual danger. Our situation is just like theirs. The spiritual danger was invisible and they could only know about it by believing Jesus. That's true for us. We get into all kinds of situations that really don't seem like any significant spiritual threat , but if we believed what the Bible said about them, we'd take the threat a lot more seriously.

Watch for Dangerous Situations

We'd do what we could to avoid dangerous situations. We would ask, “When am I most vulnerable?” When you're alone, when you're tired, when you've had a rough day, when you're around certain people, when it's Monday —we all have times and situations that we know are the contexts where we typically fall into sin. Keeping watch means being alert to those times and being prepared going into them.

Pray

Trouble Makes You Pray Hard

And that brings us to the other half of Jesus' remedy. When you watch—you stay alert, you see the threats, see the danger , you understand your vulnerability and the weakness of your flesh, what will you do about it? Watch and ... pray. That's the solution to weak flesh. Jesus said it very clearly—your flesh is weak, so to avoid falling into temptation, watch and pray.⁶ The solution to weak flesh is intensive prayer.

But the watching comes before the praying because we never really pray hard until we see how much danger we're facing and how weak we are and we get desperate. It's next to impossible to pray fervently and intensely unless you feel desperate. And not every situation is desperate. You don't stay up all night praying every night—not even Jesus did that. But if the danger is severe enough and your flesh is weak enough, that does call for extended prayer—hours of prayer.

One Hour

37 ... Could you not keep watch for one hour?

He says, “one hour” like that's a really small increment of time. That's so convicting to me because when you're talking about focused, intensive prayer, I'll just admit—for me, an hour is a huge increment

⁶ Jesus had taught them once before that some spiritual battles can only be won through prayer (Mk.9:29).

of time. If I pray for an hour straight, that seems like a massive feat of spiritual discipline. But Jesus makes it sound like that's the least Peter could have done.

This isn't something you do on a regular basis. It's for times of great spiritual crisis. I think of Paul with his thorn in the flesh. He said he prayed three times for God to take it away. I can't imagine he means he just said, "God, please take it away" three times. It must have been three separate ordeals of prayer. Three Gethsemanes where Paul broke down and really had a long, impassioned, prayer ordeal with God about it. Those three occasions might have spanned a time period of 10 or 20 or 30 years.

It's not something you do every day, but for the big things, it's essential. There may be times in your life when the difference between glorious victory and catastrophic life-changing disaster could be one solid hour of prayer. How many times have you faced some terrible crisis—a trial that feels unbearable, driving you to the point where you feel like you can't endure it another hour—you might even consider suicide—and still, not a single one-hour session in prayer over it. How many times have people suffered a fall that created anguish for the rest of their lives, and it all could have been avoided by just giving up a single hour of their precious time?

How serious does something have to be before you'd pray an hour or pray all night? That's between you and God. But how's this for a rule of thumb: the more serious the issue, the longer the prayer.

What to Pray

But what do you say to God if you're praying that long? Well, to begin with, pray that the temptation won't even happen. Pray for wisdom to know how to avoid it. And if you can't avoid it, pray for strength when it hits. Pray for the Spirit to conform your desires to God's desires. Pray that God would enable you to hate what he hates. Ask him to help you remember what you know about how damaging sin is and how satisfying closeness with God is. Ask God to help you recall promises, commands, warnings, rewards, attributes of God, and anything else that will help you in the moment of temptation. Ask God to send people who can help you in the critical moment. If your spirit is willing, ask God to help you keep it that way—"Grant me a willing spirit to sustain me."

Pray like that, and when the moment comes, your flesh won't be so weak. We're not doomed to failure because of the weakness of our flesh. If we're alert enough to see spiritual danger coming, and we engage in intensive prayer to prepare ourselves, we can have victory. If the disciples would have spent the night praying like Jesus did, in the morning their bodies would have been tired, but moment of testing would have been a very different story for them.

Not Easy

So the solution to weak flesh is simple: watch and pray. It's simple, but it's not easy. Far from it.

40 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy.

We all know how that feels. When you're driving and the sleep mechanism in your body gives the signal for your eyelid muscles to push them closed, it's next to impossible to keep them open. It's so hard to stay awake. On this night in Gethsemane, it was late, they had had a big meal, four cups of wine, hiked up a mountain, Luke says they were exhausted from grief,⁷ and their eyes were just insisting on closing.

It's hard to stay awake when your body is screaming for sleep. It's hard, but it's not impossible. They could have stood up and walked around. Maybe that's one reason Jesus kept taking breaks and coming back and check on the disciples—to help him stay awake. Jesus was just as human as they were, and his body needed sleep too. Peter, James, and John could have done the same thing—walk back and check on the other 8 every once in a while. Do some jumping jacks—whatever it takes.

⁷ Luke 22:45 When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow.

The Weakness of Weariness

We quote this very all the time, “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” We apply that to all kinds of really hard temptations. But when Jesus said the flesh is weak, he wasn’t talking about weakness against overeating, or weakness in saying no to immorality or some addiction. He’s just talking about weariness. You’re just too tired to pray. You’re too tired to read your Bible. You think about family devotions and you think, “Ugh. I just don’t have it in me today.” A huge part of spiritual warfare is something so physical and ordinary as pushing through fatigue so you can pray.

Authentic

And as a side note, passages like this are great for those times when you have doubts about whether the Bible is reliable. If you slept through the most important night of your life after Jesus told you to stay awake, and you were sawing logs while Jesus was in his worst agony, and he kept waking you up and asking you to stay awake and as soon as he stepped away you just went right back to sleep—if you had done that, would you ever tell anyone? If you were trying to make up a religion and get millions of people to follow your writings, would you tell a story like this about yourself? How did this humiliation get discovered and written down in history?⁸ Who reported it? Peter, James, and John—the sleepyheads. Whatever you think about the things they wrote, one thing everyone has to admit—these are incredibly honest men.

And not just honest. They could have been honest and still not mention this. There’re plenty of other things they didn’t mention—why include incidents that make them look like such buffoons? The only explanation is that all they cared about was showing what Jesus was like. And if that involved humiliating themselves, so be it.

Jesus’ Victory

So all that is what failure looks like. Let’s watch Jesus and see what success looks like.

1) Fellowship

What’s the first thing he did? If you say, “He prayed,” that’s not exactly right. That’s not the first thing. The first thing he did is in v.33.

The Inner Three

**32 They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray."
33 He took Peter, James and John along with him.**

The first thing Jesus did, before he prayed, was to get alone with Peter, James, and John. Why those three? Probably multiple reasons. Those are the three who became the primary leaders of the early church—the pillars (Galatians 2:9). As the leaders of the church, it’s crucial they have a deep, thorough understanding of Jesus’ nature. They’re the same three Jesus took up on the mountain to see his transfiguration⁹ where they witnessed the most dramatic display of Jesus’ divine nature. Now they’ll see the most shocking display of his human nature. They needed to see both his divine glory and his human frailty.

⁸ This is one of the most well-attested events in Jesus’ life. Not only is the scene recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but it’s also alluded to in Hebrews 5:7, John 12:27, 14:31, and 18:11.

⁹ There are unmistakable formal similarities between the transfiguration and Gethsemane in Mark. These include not only the presence of the same three disciples, but the identical use of “he took them” (παραλαμβάνει) in 9:2 and 14:33, and the statement about not knowing what to answer in 9:6 and 14:40.

They're also the three who seemed to have the biggest pride problem. Peter: "Even if everyone falls away, I will not." And James and John, when Jesus said, "Can you drink the cup I drink?" "Oh yeah, we can drink that cup. Bring it on."¹⁰ These are the three most in need of this lesson in humility.

Companionship

So those are a few possible reasons. But I think there's another reason: companionship.¹¹ This is the worst night of Jesus' life, and the first thing he does is pull aside his three closest friends.

This whole account Jesus goes back and forth from solitude with the Father, then coming back to his disciples. He wanted to draw strength from being alone with the Father in prayer, and also with his friends in fellowship. Solitude is good; isolation isn't. We need solitude, but we also need people.

A joy shared is a double joy and a sorrow shared is a half a sorrow. Jesus wanted some friends around him—so much so that he interrupts his own communion with the Father three times to go back to them.

Prayer and Fellowship

When you're in agony, it helps when someone feels something of what you feel and walks through it with you. And when you're weak, you need to draw strength from others. In times of distress, we need both solitude with God and companionship with people. Most of us tend to neglect one or the other. If you're a people person, you might become completely dependent on being with other people to prop you up, and you don't even know how to draw strength from God in solitude.

Others go to the other extreme. The more painful things get, the more they just withdraw. They isolate themselves and miss the grace that comes only through fellowship.

Jesus teaches us here how to mix both. Alone with the Father, then back to the disciples—back and forth, three times.

Now, we understand part of the cup Jesus had to drink was the desertion of his friends so that he was utterly alone. But that wasn't by his choice—he sought fellowship with his friends. And we should follow his example. We may not always find fellowship, but we should seek it.

2) Desire: Unify Your Will with God's

So Jesus sought fellowship and he prayed. And we talked last time about how the whole purpose of the prayer was to unite his will with the Father's.

Embracing God's Will

He asked the Father, "Is there any other way? Do I really have to drink this cup?" Then he goes back and sees that even his closest friends couldn't be bothered to even stay awake and pray with him in the hour of his greatest anguish. And maybe right there he thought, "Well, I have my answer. I am going to have to drink this bitter cup."

And you can just hear the fresh wave of new temptations Satan no doubt hit him with. "They don't care about you, Jesus. All your life's work—a total waste. Those guys won't last 5 minutes after your death. Your family thinks you're a nut job, your friends don't care, God has forsaken you. All of hell is against you, and you have no friends on earth or in heaven." Did he tempt Jesus with waves of self-pity? Bitterness? Despair?

He turns and heads back to the place of prayer. And as it became more and more clear that this wouldn't be one of those prayers where the Father yielded to Jesus' desires, and it would have to be Jesus who gave way, he begins to embrace the Father's plan. Remember, that's the purpose of prayer—to

¹⁰ See 10:38–39; 14:29–31.

¹¹ In Matthew's account, Jesus tells them them, "Stay here and keep watch *with me*" (Matthew 26:38. See also 26:40).

merge your will with the Father's will. Once he did that, the temptations that flattened the disciples had no power over Jesus. That panicky feeling you get when things are going horribly wrong —Jesus didn't get that during his trials and crucifixion because things were going exactly according to the Father's plan that Jesus had already embraced. The disciples' response was a train wreck because none of them had embraced God's plan on this matter at all.

You can be weak and tottering on the brink of collapse like Jesus, but if you embrace God's will, you'll be able to handle anything. And you can be the model of strength and be overflowing with resolve and willpower like the disciples, but if you haven't embraced God's will over yours, when the test comes you're done.

Conclusion: Jesus' Courage and God's Will

Some people are bothered by what a mess Jesus was in Gethsemane. They say, "There have been people who were on their way to be executed or tortured, and they were poised and calm. Then you look at Jesus shrieking in prayers to the Father and sweating drops of blood and collapsing and looking for a way out. Was Jesus not as brave as those others who faced death with some composure?"

For one thing, as I pointed out last time, Jesus wasn't just facing death. He was about to take on all the guilt of the human race and suffer punishment from the Father's hand. No man ever faced what Jesus was facing that night.

But beyond that, let me just say this about courage. How would you define courage? A simplistic definition might be this: Courage is the ability to do something dangerous or scary. But is that really courage? What about a criminal who overcomes his fear of getting caught and robs a convenience store? Or a woman who's brave enough to get an abortion or to kill her 2-year-old. Or a tax cheat who's not afraid of the IRS. Those are all people overcoming their fear to do something scary, but are they really examples of courage? Something's missing that our definition, right?

What's missing is the goal. True courage is the ability to face down terrifying obstacles *to do what is good*. Doing scary things to accomplish evil is not courage. The purpose must be to achieve good, and the greater the good you're trying to accomplish, the more virtuous the courage.

You can tell the goodness or evil of a person's heart by what they're courageous about. Think of a woman who would step in front of a grizzly bear if her child were threatened. That same woman might not have the courage to face down a mouse in her kitchen. Is she a coward or is she courageous? We would call her courageous because when something important is at stake, she stands up to danger. She loves her kids more than she loves her own life. Nothing important is at stake with the mouse, so she's not a coward if she runs from it.

Courage isn't just about willingness to face danger. It's about what is important enough in your heart to be willing to face danger. If a guy is brave enough to start a bar fight with a 300-pound brawler to impress his friends, but he can't bring himself to confess a sin to his wife, or he's too embarrassed to admit he follows Christ when he's around mockers, or he's too self-conscious to be open about his struggles in a small group at church—that man's a coward.

So the factor that makes courage virtuous is what is it that's so important to you that you're willing to face suffering or death for it? A great man is a man who is courageous over truly important things. The greater the cause, the more virtuous the courage when you stand up for that thing.

Now let me add another layer. It takes courage to face danger for the sake of something that's obviously important, like saving your child or defending your country. But what about things God says are important but that don't seem all that important in the eyes of most people? A mom might have the courage to get between a wild animal and her child. But would she have the courage to step between that animal and her enemy—someone who's been bullying her child?

Now let's look at Jesus in Gethsemane. When he stood against the onslaught of the ravages of hell and absorbed the full blast of divine punishment, it wasn't about saving face or impressing his friends or gaining some earthly reward. It wasn't even about defending a country or rescuing a child. The whole

battle was over whether Jesus would, one time, violate God's will. Jesus chose the worst imaginable torture rather than set one foot outside of God's will.

How much courage does that take? There are men who would dive on a hand grenade to save his buddies in war, but how much suffering would he be willing to endure to avoid violating God's will? Most of us will violate God's will at the drop of a hat. How many times every week do I willingly go against God's will—do something I know isn't really what God wants, or sidestep something I know he wants me to do? And what kind of threat does it take to get me to do that? Does Satan have to threaten years of unbearable torture? No. Sometimes all he has to threaten is ten seconds of discomfort and I'll cave. Sometimes a split-second of satisfaction is all it takes to lure me into violating God's will. Sometimes Satan offers me nothing and makes no threat and I still choose to go against what God wants.

For most people, doing something against God's will is one of the smallest matters there are in life. They would never cross the IRS, or their boss, or popular opinion. They would think long and hard about doing something that would make their spouse really mad. But crossing the line of God's will? It hardly warrants a moment's hesitation.

Jesus withstood the greatest nuclear blast of spiritual suffering imaginable rather than do something displeasing to the Father. When Jesus looked into that horrific cup and saw what he saw—no man ever faced a more terrifying fate. When he said to the Father, "Is there any other way?" "No." He looked at the cup again. "With every fiber of my being I want to run from this cup. I can't even imagine drinking it. But there's one thing worse—being outside of your will. Drinking this cup is an unimaginable horror, but if that's the only way to be in your will, give it to me—I'll drink every drop. If the alternative is to displease you, Father, I'll drain that cup dry." That was the most courageous and noble action ever performed in all of history.

When the mob came with swords and clubs, Jesus didn't freak out and say, "Oh no. Run!"

41 The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. 42 Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

Let us go. Forward march—right into the teeth of the lynch mob. Fearless. Poised. Unflinching. Never so much as swaying in his commitment to carrying out the Father's will. All because he spent the night watching and praying to the one who could save him from death.¹²

Closing Prayer

Father, teach us to walk in Jesus' steps. Make us men and women of courage. And we know what we're asking for when we say that. We're asking for some Gethsemanes where we have to literally get up and walk around to stay awake long enough to have an ordeal of prayer over some massive spiritual battle. Help us be men and women of prayer. Give us the faith to believe you when you tell us how serious the spiritual threats out there really are, and how weak our flesh really is so that we will be driven to watch and pray. And enable us to pray long and hard enough to strengthen our weak flesh and become men and women of courage and valor in this war.

¹² The writer of Hebrews gives us additional insight into what Jesus was praying.

Hebrews 5:7 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.

The fact that he prayed to the one who could save him from death implies that's what he was praying for—to be saved from death. Or at least that salvation from death was the outcome of his prayer ("He was heard" implies a yes answer to the prayer).

But in what sense was Jesus saved from death? He died hours after this prayer.

He was saved from death in the sense that death didn't win. If Jesus would have let his fear of death get the better of him so he didn't obey the Father, death would have won. If he had backed out of this and run away with his disciples, the threat of death would have won. In his battle against the final enemy, death, the way for Jesus to lose that battle would have been to stay alive.

Another way for death to win would have been for Jesus to stay dead. The Father delivered him from that as well.

Harmony

Luke 22:24 Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. 25 Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. 26 But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. 27 For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. 28 You are those who have stood by me in my trials. 29 And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, 30 so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

John 13:31 When he was gone, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. 32 If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. 33 "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. 34 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Matthew 26:29 I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in **my Father's** kingdom." 30 When they had sung, they went out to the Mount of Olives. 31 Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep **of the flock** will be scattered.' 32 But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." 33 Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I **never** will." 34 "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." 35 But Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the other disciples said the same.

Mark 14:25 "I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God." 26 When they had sung, they went out to the Mount of Olives. 27 "You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' 28 But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." 29 Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not." 30 "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "today--yes, tonight--before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times." 31 But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same.

Luke 22:
31 "Simon, Si-
mon, Satan has asked to
sift you as wheat. 32
But I have prayed for
you, Simon, that your
faith may not fail. And
when you have turned
back, strengthen your
brothers." 33 But he
replied, "Lord, I am
ready to go with you to
prison and to death." 34
Jesus answered, "I tell
you, Peter, before the
rooster crows today,
you will deny three
times **that you know
me.**"

John 13:
36 Simon Peter
asked him, "Lord, where
are you going?" Jesus
replied, "Where I am go-
ing, you cannot follow
now, but you will follow
later." 37 Peter asked,
"Lord, why can't I follow
you now? I will lay down
my life for you."
38 Then Jesus an-
swered, "Will you really
lay down your life for
me? I tell you the truth,
before the rooster crows,
you will disown me three
times!

Luke 22:35 Then Jesus asked them, "When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?" "Nothing," they answered. 36 He said to them, "But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one. 37 It is written: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors'; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment." 38 The disciples said, "See, Lord, here are two swords." "That is enough," he replied.

Matthew 26:36 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." 37 He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. 38 Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." 39 Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." 40 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. 41 "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

42 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." 43 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy.

44 So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. 45 Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46 Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

Mark 14:32 They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." 33 He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. 34 "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch." 35 Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. 36 "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." 37 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? 38 Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

39 Once more he went away and prayed the same thing.

40 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.

41 Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. 42 Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

Luke 22:39 Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. 40 On reaching the place, he said to them, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." 41 He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, 42 "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."

43 An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him.

44 And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

45 When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow.

46 "Why are you sleeping?" he asked them. "Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation."

Summary

The disciples didn't prepare for battle properly because of overconfidence (none of us know ourselves as well as we think we do). They thought their willing spirits were enough for victory, underestimating the weakness of the flesh. The solution to weak flesh is to watch and pray. Jesus did that, along with seeking fellowship, embraced God's will, and the result was courage and strength.