

“The Garden”

Saint Matthew’s Passion, Pt.2

During these weeks leading up to Good Friday and Easter we’re going to be looking at the events in the life of Jesus Christ that led up to his crucifixion and asking a single question...What does the death of Jesus mean? Probably a lot of people know – I hope most people *in here* at least – know the message of Christianity is Jesus died for us. But why? What did that accomplish? What does the death of Christ mean? And so we’re looking at that from different angles in the Passion of Saint Matthew – which is both the title historically given to the events surrounding Jesus death, *and* a really fantastic piece of music by Johan Sebastian Bach – who was an incredible theologian as well as a game-changing musician.

We began last week with the Last Supper, and today let’s follow up with what came next, the incident of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. I want to start off by just reading the text to you. **Matthew 26:36–46**, *“Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” 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!”

Now, to go along with our classical music, each week we are selecting a classical painting that depicts the scene from our text. Last week, we had the most reproduced painting in human history – DaVinci’s *Last Supper*. This week’s is certainly less known. Andrea Mantegna’s “Agony In the Garden” hangs in the London National Gallery, where I saw it summer before last. Mantegna was a 16th century Italian painter known for images of dramatic realism. And that is certainly the case in this painting.

There's a lot going on, but it's like a freeze frame in the middle of a storm. He's even painted the rocks to look like a reverse whirlpool – as if Jesus is about to be sucked under. Over to the right, Judas is approaching at the head of group that will arrest his Lord – which we will talk about next week. Meanwhile down below, the other disciples – painted to look like toppled statues – appear to be dead to the world. Nature itself is in on the story – the small rabbit to the left – a sign of life, think Easter – scampers *away* from Jesus. While the a black bird perched in the upper right hand corner looks down on him hungrily.

Even the sturdy little angels in the upper left hand corner don't appear comforting as one carries a cross and another a black baton – symbols of the torture and death that lies ahead. And in the middle of the storm Jesus kneels in prayer – one of the rare depictions of Christ with his back and face turned away from the viewer. He has a halo, but his posture and position are uncharacteristically awkward. Everything that is about to happen is momentarily caught in a frozen whirlwind with Jesus in the eye of the storm. He kneels, isolated and alone. But hit “play” and the action will sweep him away.

It's a great image for the story we just read. Christ alone in agony – not yet of body, but of spirit. So we're going to ask what it means, and specifically we're going to ask three questions of the text. Why the *magnitude* of Jesus' agony? Why the *immediacy* of his agony? And what *difference* does it make to us?

First of all, Why the magnitude of the agony? So after supper, Jesus leads the 12 disciples out to an olive press – that's what “Gethsemane” means – but then he takes three guys further in with him to pray. And there's an interesting word choice in the text, **V.37**, “*He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he **began** to be sorrowful and troubled.*” Something *began*. Something started. And what was it?

What did he say to them? **V.38**, “~~*Then he said to them,*~~ “*My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow **to the point of death**...*” Now we have to take that seriously. He is saying, “Something has come upon me that makes me feel it's going to kill me before I even get to the cross. It's so overwhelming. I feel like I'm going to *die* under this.”

When it says, “...*he began to be sorrowful and troubled.*” A great professor of theology at Princeton in the early 1900’s, a guy named B.B. Warfield, says the word “troubled” is the word for “horror”, and what that means is as he was walking along, something came over him...“a crushing, overwhelming, devastating sense of horror, a mental and spiritual anguish and agony that made him feel like he was dying.”

The gospel of Luke tells us one thing none of the other gospel writers tell us; Jesus was praying so intensely that there was *blood* in his sweat. Now that’s very unusual, but it is possible. Blood can come out of your pores when you’re sweating if you’re experiencing a severe shock. And so you see, something came down on Jesus Christ that sent him into incredible horror and agony. He was *reeling* with it. He was driven into the dust with it.

What was it? You say, “His impending death.” Well, ok, but that still leaves a couple of questions. First of all, what *began* to happen to him couldn’t mean he got new information. It couldn’t mean on the way he started to say, “Oh my, I really am going to die.” He *knew* he was going to die. He knew all about it. He’d been teaching his disciples.

And he didn’t just think he was going to die in general. We know by reading the Gospels that he, in a very, very, detailed and a very comprehensive way, knew *why* he was going to die. He knew he was going to suffer for sin, and he told his disciples about it.

So whatever came down upon him and hit him wasn’t the knowledge, the information, that he was going to die. And the other puzzling thing to this magnitude is the contrast of Jesus here with hundreds, thousands even, of other people who have died – been martyred - for what they believed with poise and peace.

When I was in Scotland, we would see these monuments in the middle of the street to people who were burned at the stake for their faith. They’re all over the UK. One of the most famous is in Oxford were two 16th century English Bishops, Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley were publicly martyred for their Protestant beliefs. They were bound to the stake and the flames were beginning to approach them.

And the one turned to the other and uttered these famous last words, “Be of good cheer, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day, by God’s grace, light such a candle in England as I trust shall never be put out.” Stirring words, but why do I quote them right here?

Here's why. There's no bloody sweat. Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley aren't falling to the ground and saying, "God, do I really have to do this?" They're not crushed. *Why* would hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of followers of Jesus Christ die better than Jesus himself? See, the big question is... *What* came down on him? Why the magnitude of his agony? And the answer is very simple in a way because he actually tells us all about it three times.

What is it he's wrestling with? What is it three times he goes to the Father and says, "Do I really have to go through this?" And the thing he keeps mentioning is *the cup*. "Do I have to drink the cup? Is it possible to take away this cup?" Three times he says it. So what's the cup? Well, the Bible is pretty clear on this. The cup in the Bible is the judicial wrath of God on human evil.

In ancient times, very often people were executed with a cup of terrible poison, a cup of poison that went in and basically tore up your guts, ate you up from the inside, and you died. Perhaps the most famous execution by the cup of poison was of course Socrates. But because that was the method of execution for many people, the Old Testament, the Hebrew prophets, came to use the cup as a metaphor for the wrath of God on human evil, and so there are many, many, references.

So for example, in **Ezekiel 23:33-34** we read this. "*You shall drink the cup of ruin and desolation... You will drink it and drain it dry and chew on its pieces - and you will tear your breasts.*" **Isaiah 51:17**, "*Rise up, Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath, you who have drained to its dregs the goblet that makes people stagger.*" So the reason why Ridley and Latimer, and *all* the other people who died for what they believed in didn't die the way Jesus is dying, didn't fall to the ground, didn't find this horror coming down, was they didn't face the cup. They didn't face the justice of God against all human wickedness and evil, which was just about to come down on him.

But, we haven't quite answered our question. What *began* in verse 37? What *began* as he was walking along? Didn't he know about the cup? Sure he did. Didn't he know he was going to suffer that? Of course, he did. Absolutely, he did. Well, then what's going on here? Well, what's going on here is pretty simple.

As he began to walk, he began to *experience* the wrath of God. He began to actually experience God turning away from him. See, how does God punish sin? The Bible tells us – and it's almost poetic justice - the sinful human heart wants to get away. It wants to be away from God. It wants to be able to be its own master. So the way God punishes sin is to give the heart what it wants.

What God does, as in **2 Thessalonians 1:9**, He will punish them and they will be, “...*shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might*”. In other words, what God gives the human heart, the punishment, the ultimate destruction, is to be cut off from the presence of God. And the reason that’s destruction is that we were built for the presence of God. We *need* the presence of God like the flowers need the sun or they wither. We need God’s love. We need God’s glory. We need to serve God.

Now what was happening to Jesus? What *begun* happening to Jesus in verse 37 on the way to the place of prayer? Think of it, more than anyone else, Jesus is one who *lived* in fellowship with the Father. Jesus is one who got all of his power and his grace and his love from his relationship with the Father, and therefore, as he was walking to the place of prayer, he would have started praying. He wouldn’t have waited until he got there. In his heart, he would have turned to the Father, the way he constantly does, and that’s when it came down and that’s when it hit him. Because when he turned in his soul toward the Father, there was *nothing* there.

One commentator, Bill Lane, who has written a great commentary on Mark, puts it perfectly when he says, “The dreadful sorrow and anxiety, then, out of which the prayer for the passing of the cup springs, is not an expression of fear before a dark destiny, nor a shrinking from the prospect of physical suffering and death. It is

rather the horror of the one who lives wholly for the Father...Jesus came to be with the Father for an interlude before his betrayal, but found hell rather than heaven open before him...”

Jesus Christ turned toward the Father and there was nothing there but the abyss. There was nothing there but the darkness that opens out into an infinite nothing. He turned, expecting heaven and the Father, and there was hell. Jonathan Edwards, in his great sermon on this passage called *Christ’s Agony*, puts it very vividly, he says, “The agony that Jesus experienced in the garden was caused by a vivid, bright, full, immediate view of the wrath of God. God the Father, as it were, set the cup down before him, which was vastly more terrible than Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace. He now had a near view of that furnace into which he was about to be cast. He stood and he viewed the raging flames and the glowings of its heat, that he might know where he was going and what he was going to suffer.”

He felt what Ezekiel said, “*You shall drink the cup of ruin and desolation and tear your breasts.*” He felt what Isaiah said, “*You will drink the cup of his fury, and you will stagger.*” Jesus Christ turned to the Father and there was nothing there but the beginning of the experience of wrath and hell and forsakenness. He *tasted* it, and he staggered.

He's staggering! And that means here's the answer to the first question. Why the magnitude of his agony? Because in that garden, Jesus Christ began to experience, began to receive onto himself *all* of the justice and wrath of God on human evil. It was all coming down on him, and he was *beginning* to experience it. Even before the cross.

Which by the way, if you're quick to dismiss the idea of hell, proper theology here stops you in your tracks. Some people say, "Oh I don't believe in the idea of hell and wrath because I believe in a loving God." Well, the theology of the cross doesn't really allow you to do that. You see, if you get rid of the idea of hell and wrath, you have a *less* loving God. Because if there is no wrath by God on sin and if there is no such thing as hell, it *trivializes* what Jesus has done. If you get rid of a God who has wrath and hell, you have a god who loves us *in general*, but that's not as loving as the God of the Bible, the God of Jesus Christ, who loves us with a *costly* love.

Look what it cost! Look what he did! Look what he was taking! You get rid of wrath and hell, he's not taking anything close to this, and therefore, what you've done is you've just turned his *incredible* act of love into just something very trivial, very small – "words are cheap" as the say. You get rid of the idea of wrath and hell, and you don't have a more loving god; you have a *less* loving god, a god who loved me without any cost to him at all.

So that's the implication. And by the way, if the *anticipation* of these sufferings, if the very *taste* of these sufferings sent the Son of God into shock, what must it have been to drink that cup to the bottom? Ok, so that's the answer to the magnitude of his agony, but the **second** question comes up right away, and that is, **Why the immediacy of his agony?** Why did God begin to let him experience it in the garden? Why this, in a sense, preliminary experience of it *before* the cross? Well, here's the point.

It's one thing to *say*, "I'm going to do something," but you don't know how bad it's going to feel until you get there. Jesus Christ begins to taste the wrath of God, begins to experience the lostness he's going to go through when *no one* is around. He's not nailed to the cross yet. He's not in public. Nobody is around. Everybody is asleep. And what that means is his obedience – to obey God in the matter of the cup out of love for us - was infinitely harder than if he'd only begun to experience it when he actually got to the cross.

Jonathan Edwards put it like this. He said, "Christ was going to be cast into a dreadful furnace of wrath, and it was not proper that he should plunge himself into it blindfolded, as not knowing how dreadful the furnace was. Therefore, God brought him and set him at the mouth of the furnace, that he might look in and stand and view its fierce and raging flames, might see where he was going, and might voluntarily enter into it and bear it for sinners as knowing what it was."

He continues, “If Christ had not fully known before he took it and drank it, it would not have properly been his own action as a human being,” and get this, “but when he took that cup then, knowing what was in it, so was his love to us infinitely the more wonderful and so was his obedience to God infinitely the more perfect.”

Look at what he had to do. He did two things in the garden, and those two things are he loved God with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind, and he loved his neighbor as himself. Let’s look at the second one first. Look at him. Who are the people he has to die for, drink this terrible cup for?

Peter, James, and John are the representatives of the human race. And three times Jesus looks at them and says, “I’ve never asked you to do anything for me, and now I’m asking you. This is the moment of my greatest need. This is the greatest test. I only want one thing. I don’t want to face this alone.” How human. “I don’t want to face this alone. Would you just stay awake with me? I’m not asking for advice, just stay awake.” Three times he asks, three times they fall asleep.

Now God could have easily arranged it so that that night they would have not only stayed awake, but they would have sat around and they would have said, “Lord, I can’t believe you’re doing this for us. Now we understand. How *wonderful* that you would die for us. Oh, we’d be lost if you didn’t do it. Thank you! How can we help?” But they didn’t.

They fell *asleep* on him *three* times. Every time Jesus sees them it’s like the Father is saying, “That’s the human race for you. Swallow hell for them. Take into yourself this spiritual atomic bomb and let it explode for them. And that’s the thanks you get.” He put this *enormous* pressure on Jesus, and he did it, he loved his fellow man even through we *clearly* didn’t deserve it.

But the second thing Jesus did was love God with all his heart and soul and mind by *obeying* Him. The two greatest commands you see - love God, love one another. God says, “Obey my will,” and Jesus Christ says, “All right.” But get this; every other time in the history of the world, before or after, when God comes to a human being and says, “Obey me,” God always says, “Obey and you will live.” Right? Obedience is the way of life. Right? “Obey me, and I will welcome you. Obey me, and you’ll become like Me. Obey me, and I will reward you.”

That's what God is always saying. That's what God said to the first Adam. The first Adam in the garden of Eden, God said, "Do you see the tree? Obey me about the tree, and you will live." Only once in the history of the world did God say to a human being, "Obey me...and you will *die*. Obey me...and I will send you to hell. Obey me, and I will crush you into dust."

That's the setting of George Herbert's poem, "*The Sacrifice*." You see, sin began in a garden. Now salvation is coming in a garden. Sin began when the first Adam disobeyed God about a tree, and now salvation is coming when the second Adam obeys God about a tree. You see, the first Adam was just told, "Obey me about the tree, and you will live, just don't eat it," but the second Adam, God says, "Obey me about the tree, and I will nail you to it, and I will destroy you on it."

That's the reason why you have Jesus Christ in this poem saying:

O all ye who pass by, behold and see;
Man stole the fruit, but I must climb the tree,
The tree of life to all, but only me:
Was ever grief like mine?

What's going on? Never in the history of the world has somebody had to love God and love his neighbor under this kind of stress, and therefore, what you have is the first perfect act of obedience in history; perfect fulfillment of the law. Jesus loved the Lord his God with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind, and his neighbor as himself. And not only that, I don't believe there has ever been any place where somebody obeyed God and got nothing out of it. That's real obedience, isn't it?

I mean, when I say to my kids, "Obey me," and they say, "Sure, just, what's in it for us?" I'll say, "I could tell you, but then it wouldn't be obedience. Then, it would be a negotiation." Only when you're doing something *just* for God or when you're doing something *just* for your neighbor are you really doing it for them and not you. Jesus Christ is the only person who perfectly obeyed.

There's an old African story about Jesus – it's not in the Bible, so don't go looking for it - it's an apocryphal story. But I like it. Jesus was sitting around with his disciples and he looked at them and he said, "Carry a stone for me." They all looked at each other and they didn't get it. And so Peter – and of course it would be Peter! - looks around and he picks up the *smallest* stone he possibly can, "Done!" And he puts it in his pocket. "All right. I'm in compliance."

And Jesus says, “Now follow me.” And they got up and they walked, and they walked some more, and they were all very tired and very hungry. Finally, around lunchtime, Jesus says, “Okay, everybody sit down.” They all sat down. “Get out your stones.” They got out their stones. He waved his hand, and all the stones turned to bread. He said, “Now, enjoy lunch.”

Here’s Peter looking sadly at his little mini muffin and he eats it, but he says, “Alright, okay, now I get it. Why didn’t he tell me to start with?” And so Jesus stands up and before they set off, says again, “Carry a stone for me.” And Peter looks around and he says, “Now I got it,” so he takes this huge boulder. He’s putting it on his shoulder, and he’s just about crushed under it. He can hardly walk along, but he’s saying, “I can’t wait for supper.” And so on he plods.

Finally, around supper time, Jesus brings them all to the shore of a river, and he says, “Now everybody throw your stone in the river.” They all throw their stones in the river, and then Jesus says, “Now follow me,” and he begins to walk away – no food. And they’re staring at him, and he looks back and says, “Who were you carrying the stone for?”

Now nobody has ever actually carried a stone for Jesus, but Jesus carried a stone for you. Let me tell you what the stone was like. It *did* crush him. It utterly crushed him. He got nothing out of it. In other words, he obeyed God just for God, because God said to him, “Obey me, and I’ll kill you,” as it were. He loved us just for us, because we fall asleep on him all the time, and therefore, what we have in the garden of Gethsemane is the fullest salvation.

Let me give you a little theological lesson. You don’t just have in the garden a *dying* Savior, but a *doing* Savior. You don’t have just Jesus Christ dying the death you should have died, but living the life you should have lived. If you thought up to now - and some of you have - that all Jesus Christ did for us when he died was he took our sins upon him, our punishment upon him, so that when we believe in him our sins are wiped out, that’s right, but wake up. That’s not *all* he did.

Because if all he did was take upon himself our sins, that means when you believe in him, your sins are wiped out, *but* it’s up to you now to live a good life and to *earn* God’s blessing and love and welcome – saved by faith, *stay* saved by works. A lot of Christians live like that. But that’s *not* all he did. Jesus didn’t just die the death we should have died. He *lived the life* we should have lived.

He's not just a dying Savior, but a doing Savior. In other words, he *perfectly* obeyed so that when we believe in him, not only do our sins go into his account, not only does God treat him as we deserve to be treated, but *his* righteousness goes into *our* account, this kind of righteousness. And God treats us the way Jesus deserves to be treated. It's the great exchange. And it's the only hope we have.

In the garden, Jesus was receiving from God what we deserve, and we were getting from God what he deserves. And this means you are supposed to live life with your head up. This means you do not have to be worried about who is rejecting you. This means that you're supposed to be reveling in the fact that God is ravished with your beauty, not just simply tolerating you because Jesus wiped out your sins and now you're pardoned. Do you see? There has never been obedience like this. He's not just a dying Savior, but a doing Savior.

Now lastly, I've actually done much of the answering, but the **third** question is, **What difference does this make to us?** All difference in the universe. On the one hand, you have a model here, don't you? This is how you're supposed to live. Look at the integrity of Jesus. Or let me put it to you this way. What are you like in the dark, when nobody is looking?

Is it the same as when you're in the light, when *everybody* is looking? Is there anything you do in the dark you wouldn't want your friends to see in the light? Look at Jesus Christ. There's integrity. He is *exactly* the same when no one is looking as when people are looking. He's a model of integrity.

Also, he's a model of prayer. Look at how he's emotionally honest. He doesn't go in to God saying, "Oh, Lord. This will be hard, but I'm just praising your name. I know that somehow I'll get through it with your help." No. He's emotionally so honest. He pours himself out. He says, "I don't want to do this!" Here's the Son of God saying, "I don't want to do this." Talk about emotional honesty. Yet, he knows the purpose of prayer is not to bend God's will to our will, but to mold our will to God's. Look at him loving people who let him down.

Is there anybody who has fallen asleep on you? Is there anybody who really has let you down in the moment of your greatest need? What have you done with them? Have you just written them off? Have you pulled back? How can you do that when Jesus has done this for you who have fallen asleep on him over and over? So what a model for relationships, what a model for prayer, what a model for personal integrity, but...*only* as a model, it'll kill you. As a model alone, it will kill you.

However, if you see him not just being your example but being your *substitute* and your Savior, that's the difference, because I'll tell you...Do you know why I have trouble really obeying God? Do you know why I have trouble, and probably why you have trouble as well? Why do we have trouble *completely* giving ourselves to God, totally and completely laying ourselves out *unconditionally*, total surrender? Why don't we do it? It's a lack of trust.

First, on the one hand, we don't trust *Him*. Right? We're afraid God might not have our best interest in mind, that He might ask us to do something that won't be really good for us. So on the one hand, we don't really trust God, but on the other hand, we don't really trust *ourselves*. One of the reasons why we don't give ourselves wholly and utterly and completely is because we're afraid of failure. We're afraid *we're* going to let God down. We're afraid we're going to wear out God's patience and love.

But look at Jesus in the garden. This will heal anything. All your lack of trust in God and even all your lack of trust in yourself. Look, here is a love that hell came down on...God's love for you, hell came down on it, and it didn't eat through it. His love for you, hell came down on it, and it didn't break it. And if *that* cup didn't destroy it, then *nothing* will.

See, on the one hand that will heal you of the trust problem. On the one hand, if Jesus would do this for you, how dare you doubt him? How can we do it? How could you even *begin* to think he's not out for your best interest?

On the other hand, here's why I want you to give yourself to Christ totally and completely this morning, because if you fail, do you think somehow that's going to wear through God's love for you? Can you believe that after the garden of Gethsemane Jesus Christ is going to look down at you, at anytime ever, and say, "Well, that does it"?

If *this* didn't do it, how are you going to do it? If this didn't eat through his love for you, how is something you do going to eat through his love for you? Nothing will! This is the love you have been after. This is the love you need. No friendship love, no married love, no career success, no critical acclaim...*Nothing* will satisfy you like this.

Nothing will turn you into a person of integrity. *Nothing* will make it possible for you to deal with the injustice in your life - because you see he dealt with a great injustice. *Nothing* will help you forgive people falling asleep on you - because we fell asleep on him in the ultimate way. *Nothing* will help you be able to handle the little cups of suffering in your life that you don't understand - because he took the big cup. *Nothing* will help you trust him like seeing the ultimate love.

As Jonathan Edwards basically puts it, “The Father, in a sense, gets next to him and says, ‘Here’s the cup you are to drink, Son. This is the furnace into which you are going to be cast if they are going to be saved. There is no other way. Either they perish or you perish. Do you see how terrible the heat is? Do you see what pain and anguish you must endure? Will you still go through with it? Is your love such that you will go in?’”

And Edwards, in his sermon, says, “Did Jesus turn to his Father and say, ‘Why should I, who am so great and glorious a person...? Why should I go plunge myself into such dreadful, amazing torments for people who cannot ever requite me for it and who will not even stay awake with me in my hour of greatest need? Why should I do this for them?’ But he didn’t. He loved us.” Look at Jesus dying in the dark for you. Adore him. Fall down and adore him for it, and when you get up, you’ll be more like him.

Let’s pray...