

# The Passion of Lent – The Garden of Gethsemane

## by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

### Prayer of Illumination

Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word.  
Silence in us any voices but your own,  
so that we may hear your Word and also do it,  
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

### Background

The ancient city of Jerusalem had no gardens. It was crowded, but there was also an unusual law that prohibited the sacred soil of Jerusalem from being defiled by manure for gardens. The rich were able to purchase land outside the city and plant gardens there to relax and get away from the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem. It's quite possible Jesus had a friend of influence who allowed him to enjoy these gardens to get away from it all or to pray.

The word Gethsemane means "oil press." The oil press was a device where one wooden or stone wheel would turn within another. The intense pressure would crush olives, forcing the liquid oil into a trough.

Like an olive in the oil press, Jesus was being crushed. In his anguish he cried out for two things: connection with God and connection with friends.

*So let's hear now from:*

### Scripture: Mark 14:32-52 (NRSV)

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. He came a third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand."

Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders.

Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. Then they laid hands on him and arrested him.

But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to them, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled." All of them deserted him and fled.

A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

## **SERMON – The Garden of Gethsemane**

It was 399 BC and the great Greek philosopher Socrates was indicted for failing to honor the Athenian gods and for corrupting the young with his thought and teachings. Plato recounts Socrates giving a spirited defense of his virtue before the jury, but calmly accepting their verdict. Socrates' disciples wept and mourned for their leader. When the day came for Socrates' execution, he "appeared both happy in manner and words as he died nobly and without fear." He then drank the cup of brewed hemlock his executioner handed him, walked around until his legs grew numb and then lay down, surrounded by his friends, and waited for the poison to reach his heart.

In many ways, you'd think that Jesus would approach his death in much the same way as Socrates. But he didn't. And that Jesus' disciples would respond like the disciples of Socrates. They didn't. Before the garden, Jesus had been instructing, planning, preparing, and prophesying about his death. He was firmly in control. But not now.

The garden is a very raw and real scene—the humanity of Jesus is laid bare. Distressed and agitated about his impending violent death, Jesus cried out,

*"my soul is crushed with sorrow to the point of death."*

Jesus was not only falling apart, he was literally falling down—throwing himself down in anguish.

Psychologist Dr. William Gaultiere has written that nearly forty different emotions and conditions of Jesus are recorded in the Scriptures: anxiety, anger, shame, sadness, pain, surprise, and peace to name a few of them. This is important—Jesus gives us permission to fully experience our emotions in the appropriate context. As Christians we're not called to stoically stuff our emotions or bury them. By experiencing our emotions, we're freed to move forward in due time.

So it's important to take a closer look at the emotions Jesus' expressed to God and his friends in the garden. Abba Father, for you all things are possible, remove this cup from me, yet not what I want, but what you want.

Abba is an Aramaic word which was a term of affection and closeness for your father—Dad. This is the only time in the gospels Jesus used such intimate terms with God. Yet it powerfully shapes our understanding of Jesus And our understanding of God. We read later in Paul that because the Spirit of the Son resides in us, we too can call God Abba. Through Christ, we can be in that same intimate relationship with God that Jesus enjoys—especially in our darkest hour and the most tumultuous of times. Even though we don't understand, We know we're going to be OK. Somehow, someway, God is going to work all things for the good of his children.

But there's still a very genuine struggle between the will of Jesus and the will of God going on here. This is very important for how we express our faith: The garden gives us permission to wrestle with God. Jesus knew it wasn't a question if God could. ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE FOR YOU. It was a question whether God will take this cup from him.

But Jesus also shows us with God there's always that point where we say, YET. "Yet not what I will, but what you will." This is the greatest statement of trust in the Bible. There are tipping points in life. And there are yielding points in faith. Where we relent. Relinquish control. Let go. And TRUST God.

There is a power and a change that takes place at the yielding point. You see, one of the major themes in Mark's gospel is the obedience of Jesus to God's will. If Jesus did this, how much more should we?

- Three times Jesus prays for deliverance.
- Three times the answer from God is "no."
- Three times Jesus says to the disciples, "watch and pray."
- Three times the three disciples are found sleeping.
- Three times Peter will deny Christ. "Sit here and watch, while I pray."

The word "watch" in the Greek was used for soldiers stationed on watch for the enemy. It could also be used for a security guard watching for burglars. Jesus longs for our company. When we find ourselves in times of trial and testing— we need the support of friends. Not so much advice—just their presence. You don't need words or even actions—just be there.

But as we've been painfully seeing, Jesus' closest friends were fair-weather friends. Frenemies. As Jesus struggled, His friends slumbered. It was a role reversal: remember in the boat when Jesus slept and the disciples panicked in the storm? Jesus is waving us over—Come with me, sit here while I pray. Stay with me. Be prayerful. Be alert. Don't panic, but be aware. Stay focused. One theologian has said, Jesus' message Can be boiled down to this phrase: Pay attention.

Faith gives us peace, But our faith also needs to trouble us, sober us up. Make us uncomfortable—a little sleepless sometimes. Don't miss the moment and sleepwalk through life.

So Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John. The same ones who saw Jesus transfigured. The three saw another transfiguration in the garden— Jesus was now transfigured by his sorrow. They had just

promised that they would not desert Jesus. This was their opportunity to stand by their boast. But they folded like a house of cards in the garden. Jesus couldn't even call Peter by his new disciple's name, but addressed him as old Peter, "Simon, could you not stay awake for one hour?" Was it too much wine from the Last Supper? Was it emotional exhaustion? Were they just paralyzed with fear? "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." The spirit is our human response to God. The flesh is our human weakness. And in times of testing, so often our weakness is oh so strong. Yet we know that when we are weak, He is strong.

Judas found Jesus at the perfect place—in the dark, away from the city, and out of the sight of the crowds. Judas arrived with a crowd with swords and clubs—it was overkill. Jesus always spoke in the day—day to day. Judas the Zealot wanted a Messiah that was a political revolutionary—maybe this mob would force Jesus' hand and he would finally step up and revolt.

It was customary at that time for disciples to greet their Rabbi with a kiss—it was a sign of respect, affection, and friendship. The one I will kiss is the man. Rabbi! And Judas kissed Jesus with the kiss of death. The Greek word used for Judas' kiss tells us it wasn't just a quick peck. It was a long, deliberate kiss—to clearly mark Jesus to be arrested and detained. Chaos ensued. The high priest's slave's ear was cut off by a bystander. Out of nowhere, a certain young man's tunic was ripped off and he ran away buck naked for dear life.

Jesus called the disciples to DROP EVERYTHING and FOLLOW Christ. But this one dropped everything and FLED AWAY from Christ. They stripped the young man of his clothing, and he ran. They stripped Jesus of his clothing, and he stayed—willingly. Surrendered to God, Jesus surrendered to the crowd. He wrestled with God in prayer—but now Jesus was ready to embrace God's plan. The struggle of the garden was over. Jesus was at peace—he was ready to face the cross. All of them deserted Jesus and fled. Jesus was not only betrayed and arrested—he was alone. Without friend or ally. God-forsaken.

Jesus beckons us, "If any would come after me, They must die to self, daily take up their cross, and follow me."

This Lent, don't run away from Christ, follow hard after Jesus. Watch and pray. Stay awake with Christ.

Amen.

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