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PRAYER OR TEMPTATION?

Luke 22:39-53

By

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Luke Lesson 102

Prayer or Temptation? Luke 22:39-53

I have told you before of the recurring dreams that I have had about being in a college class, late in the semester, and I suddenly realize that I have not been attending the class. A big exam looms ahead and I am not prepared and it is too late to get prepared. Another version of that dream that I have as a pastor is that it is Sunday morning and I suddenly realize that I'm supposed to preach, but I haven't prepared. Panic sets in. Usually I wake up about then, relieved that it was only a bad dream.

Nobody likes tests or difficult situations; but the one thing worse than a test is not being prepared for it. Whether you are in school or not, tests are an inevitable part of life. In real life, unlike school, tests often hit without warning. You go in for a routine checkup, but the doctor looks concerned. He says, "We need to run some tests." The report comes back: cancer. Or, you go to work as usual, and the boss calls you in and explains that the company has to lay off a certain number of workers. You are suddenly without a job. The phone rings and you learn that a loved one was killed in an accident. We could multiply examples.

The question is, how do we prepare for these unannounced tests so that we pass the test, not fail? How can we be ready so that we endure and even triumph, not get wiped out by life's trials? In our text, Jesus and the disciples are on the brink of the supreme test of their lives. Before the night was over, Jesus would be betrayed and arrested, and nailed to the cross by the next morning. The disciples would be scattered, fearful, and confused, with Peter openly denying the Lord. Jesus was prepared and passed the test; the disciples were unprepared and failed.

To an outside observer, it would seem that the disciples were prepared for the test of that awful evening, but that Jesus was not. The disciples boasted of their strong commitment to follow Jesus, even to prison and death (22:33). They were not anxious or distressed, but were calm enough to sleep. But Jesus (and I'm speaking here from the perspective of an outside observer, not from

God's perspective) looked like an emotional wreck. He was extremely distressed and troubled, even to the point of death (Mark 14:33-34). He was in so much agony that His sweat became like drops of blood (Luke 22:44). He cried loudly with tears (Heb. 5:7). You would think, looking on, that the disciples were prepared and that Jesus was falling apart. And yet the disciples were about to fail terribly and Jesus was about to endure victoriously the greatest trial that anyone has ever had to endure. What made the difference?

If we do not pray as Jesus prayed, we will fall
into temptation as the disciples fell.

Jesus told the disciples, "Pray that you may not enter into temptation" (22:40, 46). Those are the options: pray or enter into temptation. The human race originally fell into temptation and sin in a garden. Jesus, the last Adam, resisted temptation and overcame the enemy in the garden of Gethsemane. If we want to overcome the trials and temptations that hit us, we must learn from our Lord how to pray as He prayed. First, a word about trials:

1. The trials we face can be either a test that strengthens us or a temptation that brings us down.

Every trial that we face is either a test of our faith or a temptation that can cause our faith to fail, depending on how we handle it. James 1:13-14 tells us that God does not tempt anyone to evil, but rather, we are tempted when we are carried away and enticed by our own sinful desires. We can never blame God for our own disobedience and sin. But Scripture also tells us that God tests His servants (Gen. 22:1; Deut. 8:2, 16; 13:3; 2 Chron. 32:31; Job 1:8-12; Ps. 11:4-5; 66:10-12). He uses tests to refine us, to strengthen our faith, to deepen our love for Him, and to teach us to obey Him no matter what the cost (Heb. 5:8; James 1:2-4; 1 Pet. 4:12; 5:8-10). The same trial can be either a temptation to sin if we yield to the flesh or a test to strengthen us if we walk in the Spirit.

Satan tries to use the trials we encounter to bring us down. God wants to use them to strengthen and establish us. It's like the difference between Ralph Nader testing a car and the manufacturer testing the same car. Nader's purpose is to prove that there is a flaw in the car that renders it unfit for the market. The manufacturer's purpose is to prove that the car can endure the most severe

road conditions without failure. It has stood the test. But until the car is tested, you don't know for sure how it will perform under difficult conditions.

To use another example, if I say to you that my children are obedient, you may say, "Prove it." So I say, "Kids, eat your ice cream!" They obey me with great delight. But you would rightly say, "That is no test of their obedience. It didn't prove anything." The real test would be if I said, "Eat your spinach," or, "Clean your room." If they obeyed that test cheerfully, you could rightly say, "I have obedient children."

At all times we are subject to various tests and temptations, due to the world, the flesh, and the devil. But some times are more intense in terms of temptation. When the world, the flesh, and the devil all press in on us in the same situation, we are in serious spiritual danger. This hour that Jesus and the disciples faced especially was under the power of darkness (22:53). Satan wanted to destroy God's plan of salvation by tempting Jesus to avoid the cross. The Jewish leaders, representing the world, wanted to get rid of Jesus so that they could continue in their place of power and prestige. There were internal temptations that Jesus faced that made the cross reprehensible to Him. The disciples wrestled with fear and confusion. So this was an extremely intense trial. Jesus is our example on how to endure; the disciples are our negative example of what to avoid.

2. Just as Jesus prayed and resisted temptation, so should we.

There is a great mystery here, as to how the Son of God could be so distressed and troubled, to the degree that He even needed the ministry of an angel. Probably it was the theological difficulty of this that led some early copyists of the Greek New Testament to leave out verses 43 and 44. The early church was battling the Arian heresy, that denied the deity of Christ, and perhaps a copyist wrongly thought that he would protect the deity of our Lord by leaving out these verses. Some scholars argue that they were not a part of the original text of Luke, but they admit that they come from a very early tradition. Probably they should be included.

Whether Jesus literally sweat blood (medical cases have been documented of people being so distressed that their capillaries break down, mixing blood with sweat) or whether Luke is speaking metaphorically, I do not know. But Jesus endured a severe emotional, physical, and spiritual trial in the garden. The mystery here is that Jesus is both undiminished deity and perfect, full humanity in one person. His two natures are neither mixed nor diminished. In our text, Jesus' deity comes through by showing Him to be in command of everything, even in the details of His arrest. Judas did not take Jesus by surprise. He knew what was coming. His divine power is seen in His merely touching the servant's ear and healing it. He could have struck dead all of His enemies if He had so chosen. But His humanity comes through in the agony He endured in the garden as His holy soul contemplated bearing our sins.

Jesus' prayer life stems from His perfect humanity. He is our example of how we, as weak human beings, should be totally dependent on God. Prayer is the language of dependence. When we fail to pray, we fail to depend on God. We should apply five things about Jesus' prayer in the garden to our prayer life:

A. Jesus prayed out of a great sense of need.

Jesus was weak and He knew He was weak; so He prayed fervently. If you think that it sounds like heresy to say that Jesus was weak, I would say that it is heresy to deny that Jesus was weak, because to deny it is to deny His humanity. Perhaps because most of the major cults deny Jesus' deity, we have swung so much to the side of defending it that we are afraid to affirm His full humanity. But as Hebrews 2:17 states, "He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God." Although Jesus did not have a sin nature as we do, and thus was not tempted by His own sinful lusts, He was "tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15).

Of course this was not the only time that Jesus was weak and needy. He came into this world as a newborn baby. Last week I had the joy of holding my first grandchild, a sweet seven-week-old granddaughter. I remarked to my daughter how amazing it is that we all enter this world so weak, helpless, and vulnerable, totally

dependent on the care and protection of our parents. Jesus came into this world just like that, weak and defenseless.

Even as a full-grown man, Jesus was often weary, hungry, and thirsty. He was so tired that He fell asleep in the back of a boat in a storm. He was thirsty enough to ask the Samaritan woman at the well to give Him a drink. He was hungry enough in the wilderness that the devil could tempt Him to turn the stones into bread. On more than one occasion, Jesus was moved to tears, showing us that He had normal human emotions. He suffered the pain of rejection, both from the nation and from Judas. And, of course, Jesus suffered physical pain and death itself on the cross.

What was it that led Jesus to be in such agony in the garden? We cannot fully enter into what Jesus faced, and we tread here on holy ground. The thought of death itself must have caused Jesus agony. Death is God's curse on this fallen world. It is an ugly reminder of the fact that we are subject to sin and judgment. Jesus must have recoiled as He thought about dying.

But I believe that the main source of Jesus' agony was the looming realization of what it would mean for Him, the sinless Son of God, one with the Father from eternity, to bear the sins of His people on the cross. Isaiah 53:6 states, "But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him." Paul expressed it, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

The extent to which we are holy is the extent to which we recoil in hatred from sin. If you can watch sin on TV or in a movie without being affected by it, you are not far along in holiness. To hear the Lord's name taken in vain, to view sexual immorality or violence, should make us draw back in horror. Being perfectly holy, Jesus would have been utterly horrified at the thought of being defiled by sin. He was about to be forsaken by God the Father and to endure God's awful wrath against sinners as He was made sin on our behalf.

Jesus knew that the full fury of Satan's domain of darkness would be unleashed on Him as He went through His trial and as He hung on that cross. Knowing that Satan is such a hideous and powerful enemy, Jesus was aware of the intense battle that He

would shortly face. Thus it was out of His great sense of need that Jesus prayed. Even so, our awareness of our own great needs should drive us to prayer in every situation.

B. Jesus prayed intimately to the Father.

He addressed God as “Father” (22:42). Matthew 26:39, 42 reports Him as repeatedly calling God “My Father.” Mark 14:36 says that He cried, “Abba, Father.” Abba was the Aramaic word of closeness and intimacy that children used in addressing their fathers. Jesus instructed us to pray to God as our Heavenly Father (Matt. 6:9).

A Roman emperor was once parading through the streets of the imperial city, enjoying a victory celebration. Roman legionnaires lined the parade route to keep back the cheering people. At one place along the way was a small platform where the royal family sat. As the conqueror approached, his youngest son, who was just a little boy, jumped down, burrowed through the crowd, and tried to run out to meet him.

“You can’t do that,” said one of the guards as he caught the boy in his strong arms. “Don’t you know who is in that chariot? That’s the emperor!” The boy quickly responded, “He may be your emperor, but he’s my father!” (“Our Daily Bread,” 1977). That boy had the privilege of access to the supreme ruler of the Roman Empire because he was related to him as son to father.

Even so, we have access to the Sovereign of the universe as His children through faith in Christ. We can draw near knowing that He will welcome us as a father welcomes his children.

C. Jesus prayed honestly, presenting His desires before the Father.

Even though intellectually Jesus knew God’s eternal decree, which included His dying on the cross for our sins, His humanity recoiled in horror from the thought of bearing the Father’s wrath. So He prayed, “If You are willing, remove this cup from Me” (22:42). Luke greatly condenses the narrative; the other synoptic Gospels report that He prayed it repeatedly (Mark 14:36, 39). The fact that He first fell to His knees (Luke 22:41) and then on His face (Matt. 26:39) shows the intensity of feeling that Jesus was expressing in His prayers. In other words, Jesus was not covering up

the intensity of His emotions, trying to look “spiritual” by being calm and unaffected. He poured out His soul honestly to the Father, even to the extent of asking that somehow, if possible God’s eternal decree be altered!

John Calvin asks and answers the question of how Christ could ask for something impossible, that God would alter His decree by sparing Jesus from the cross. He says that Jesus, like other godly believers in a time of strong emotion, was not contemplating the secrets of God or deliberately inquiring as to what is possible to be done, but was carried away by the earnestness of His wishes. He compares it to Moses and Paul, when they both asked God to blot them out of His book of life (Exod. 32:33; Rom. 9:3). He says, “This, therefore, was not a premeditated prayer of Christ; but the strength and violence of grief suddenly drew this word from his mouth, to which he immediately added a correction” (*Calvin’s Commentaries* [Baker], “Harmony of the Gospels,” 3:230-231). The point for us is to pour out our souls honestly before God, knowing that He cares about how we feel.

D. Jesus prayed submissively, seeking the Father’s will above His own.

After asking that the cup of suffering could be removed, Jesus quickly added, “Yet not My will, but Yours be done” (22:42). Even though Jesus honestly prayed His feelings, He quickly restrained Himself and brought Himself into submission before the Father’s perfect will. God’s will is often the most difficult path for us in the short run, but it always results in great blessing in the long run if we obey. For the joy set before Him, Jesus endured by submitting to the cross (Heb. 12:2).

Calvin here asks and answers the question, how could Christ’s will be free from all vice, while it did not agree with the will of God? In other words, if God’s will is the only rule of what is right and good, then all feelings at variance with it are wrong. Calvin answers that although we should regulate all our feelings by God’s good will, there is a certain kind of indirect disagreement which is not faulty or sinful. He cites as examples the desire to see the church in a calm and flourishing condition; or to wish that God’s children were delivered from afflictions; or that all superstitions were removed from the world; or that the rage of wicked men be

restrained so as to do no injury (3:231). Although these things are right in themselves, so that we may desire them, it may please God to order a different state of affairs. And so we must submit to His perfect will. We may express our desires to the Lord as long as we always bow before His will, which we may not fully understand.

E. The result of Jesus' prayer was that he was strengthened to endure victoriously.

The Father sent an angel to strengthen Him (22:43). Spurgeon remarks on how extraordinary it seems that the Lord of life and glory, "God of very God," was so weak that He needed the ministry of one of His creatures, an angel, to strengthen Him (*The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Logos CD], vol. 48, # 2769)! I do not know if the angel came with a special message from the Father, if just his presence reassured Jesus of the Father's care, or if he mopped His brow or gave Him a drink of cool water to refresh Him after His bloody sweat. But somehow the angel strengthened Jesus in response to His prayers.

The fact of Jesus' strengthening is seen in the story of the arrest. Here the disciples fall apart, while Jesus remains composed and in control of the situation. He is not surprised in the least by Judas, but rather confronts him one last time with his terrible sin. While Peter swings the sword, missing his target (the center of the servant's head) and lopping off an ear, Jesus calmly stops this violent response and heals the severed ear (His last miracle). While the armed mob surrounds Him, Jesus calmly confronts the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders, who easily could have arrested Him in the temple, had they not been afraid of the people. Then He went peaceably with them to His final destiny.

The point is, Jesus' prayer beforehand strengthened Him to endure victoriously the trials and temptations afterward. Usually, I'm afraid, we don't pray until *after* the trial hits. Of course we should pray then; but we would be much stronger if we had been praying beforehand.

Let's look briefly at the negative example, the disciples' failure to pray:

3. The disciples give us a negative example in that they failed to pray and they succumbed to temptation.

In contrast to Jesus, who was aware of His great need ...

A. The disciples were oblivious to their great need.

Jesus warned them twice to pray so that they may not enter into temptation. But they were blind to the real danger that was quickly approaching, and so they failed to pray.

If we could only see ourselves as the Lord sees us, we would pray about everything because we would see how truly needy we are about everything. We cannot even draw our next breath without the Lord's mercy. We will not have food on the table at our next meal if God does not provide. We cannot serve Him unless we rely on His strength. As Jesus said, "Apart from Me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

B. The disciples were operating on the human plane, not on the spiritual plane.

They were allowing the flesh to dominate the spirit. They were tired and depressed, and so they slept rather than prayed. When Jesus was about to be arrested, Peter started swinging his sword. When Jesus was led away, although Luke does not record it, the disciples left Jesus and fled for their own safety (Mark 14:50). They were operating on the human plane. If they had been in prayer with Jesus, they could have responded in the Spirit.

Conclusion

So the options are: prayer or temptation. Cyprian said, "If He prayed who was without sin, how much more it becometh a sinner to pray." Years ago in Central Africa, the gospel reached a number of tribes and there were many new believers. Just as a newborn baby cries, so these babes in Christ began to cry out to the Lord in prayer. Since they had no church building, they cleared a central spot in the jungle where they could gather for prayer. Soon there were trails from many different huts that converged on that spot. Whenever a convert seemed to be losing his first love and enthusiasm, other believers would admonish him saying, "Brother, the grass is growing on your path."

Is the grass growing on your path to God? If it is, you will fall into temptation. Prayer or temptation—those are the options. "Pray that you may not enter into temptation."

Discussion Questions

1. What is your biggest hindrance to prayer? How can you overcome it?
2. How can we become more aware of our total need for the Lord in every situation?
3. Some say that it is a cop out to pray, "Your will be done." Agree/Disagree? Why?
4. Some say that we should vent our rage at God if that's how we feel. They cite the Psalms as support. Agree/Disagree? Why?

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