LESSONS FROM THE GARDEN

Matthew 26:31-46

I want to begin this morning by reading a passage from Isaiah which directly applies to our passage in Matthew 26. Listen to Isaiah’s description of our Lord written 7 centuries earlier… READ Isaiah 53:3-5.

This passage most certainly describes the pain and the shame that Jesus suffered for us on the cross at Calvary. And for that we who trust Him as our Savior are eternally grateful. But I believe also that this passage in Isaiah describes the very character of Jesus – He was “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.” Jesus left His throne in heaven and humbled Himself and came to dwell among us for 33 years in human flesh. God incarnate! Immanuel, God with us! And yet He, the very Messiah proclaimed by many of the O.T. prophets, when He finally came was rejected by His own people. The Jewish leaders hated Him. This must have grieved Him. Even His own hometown people of Nazareth held Him in contempt and tried to kill Him. Three times the gospels record Jesus weeping over Jerusalem (Luke 13:34, Luke 19:41-42 and Matt 23:37). His hand-picked chosen 12 disciples disappointed Him on numerous occasions. This caused Jesus much sorrow as He had to constantly rebuke them for their unbelief and for a lack of spiritual discernment. We know Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. This was more than just sorrow for a friend who had died because Jesus knew that He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. This was the sorrow He felt for fallen humanity and the terrible sting of death, the sheer grief from losing a loved one – this is what sin had produced. And so Jesus wept… and He wept for us and for our sad human state! What I want you to understand is this: Jesus’ sorrow and grief extended far beyond the cross. We see it over His entire 3 ½ year earthly ministry. And we’ll see it in our lesson this morning.

READ Matthew 26:31-35

It’s very early on Friday morning, just after midnight. Jesus and His disciples have just made their way out of the city of Jerusalem (just having celebrated the Passover), across the Kidron Valley and up the Mount of Olives. There Jesus had a favorite spot in the Garden of Gethsemane. Luke records that it was Jesus’ custom to head over to the Mount of Olives, probably to this same spot. There He could have privacy and pray. John records that Jesus often met there with His disciples. So this was a place that was off the beaten path that would have been quite familiar to Jesus and His disciples. And within the next few hours Judas, who would have known about this private secluded spot in the Garden (John says that Judas knew the place), will lead a band of Roman soldiers and religious officials to this private spot in the Garden of Gethsemane to arrest Jesus.

Jesus knows all this is going to happen. He knows that He’s going to be arrested. His disciples are all going to scatter. He will die, be raised to life and then meet His disciples afterward in Galilee. Jesus knows all this and He wants to prepare His disciples for it. Of course His disciples don’t want to hear it. “No, Lord, we’re not going to deny You or leave You. We will die with You, but we will never deny You.”

But we know that they do, in fact, scatter. We know that Peter does, in fact, deny Jesus three times. We’re told in the gospels that only John is present at the crucifixion. We studied a couple of weeks ago the mindset of the disciples following Jesus’ death – confusion and sadness. It was not boldness or an eager anticipation of His resurrection. What I want you to see is that what Jesus predicts here in this passage is going to happen, does happen. And it happens despite all of His disciples’ bravado to the contrary. The disciples express their confidence (it is self-confidence) that what Jesus says here will not happen. So that sets the stage for you.

READ Matthew 26:36-39

Jesus takes Peter, James and John and goes a little farther into the Garden to pray. Jesus is “sorrowful” and “troubled.” The KJV says He was “very heavy,” in other words, Jesus was in distress. Jesus is in turmoil, in conflict, He’s struggling with something and He needs to meet with His Father about it. His sorrow is so intense that it is literally killing Him, v 38. Luke mentions that God sends an angel to Jesus to strengthen Him. So why is Jesus in such anguish and deep sorrow? What’s going on?

Is this a case where the human side of Jesus is struggling with going to the cross and all of the pain and suffering that it will bring while the divine side of Jesus knows full well that He must die and fulfill His mission of redemption? At first reading of v 39 that’s what one might think: “My Father [very intimate and personal], if it be possible, let this cup [the cup of God’s wrath and judgment, Ps 75:8, Isa 51:17] pass from me [talking about the cross]; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will [ultimately I submit to Your will].”

I think the conflict is much deeper than that. Look, Jesus knows that He must go to the cross and die. He’s been saying this all along. This is the plan. In John 12:27 Jesus says, “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour.” Jesus knows He must go to the cross. Later on in John 12 He talks about the Son of Man being lifted up signifying what kind of death He was going to die.

I submit to you that this is a spiritual battle taking place in our Lord’s life. I looked at three commentaries and Matthew Henry, J. Vernon McGee and John MacArthur all see Satan at work attacking our Lord. Matthew Henry sees Jesus as “engaged in an encounter with the powers of darkness.” J. Vernon McGee says “He was tempted by Satan in Gethsemane.” John MacArthur sees a parallel between the 3 waves of temptation in the wilderness and the three separate times Jesus goes off to pray. In both temptation events angels were sent to minister to Jesus. So what might Satan’s temptation have sounded like? “Jesus, You don’t have to go to the cross and suffer humiliation and agonizing pain. You’re the Son of God! Certainly God’s plan of redemption can be accomplished some other way.” He’s tempting Jesus to avoid the cross.

In John 14:30 Jesus had told His disciples, “I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of the world [Satan] is coming. He has no claim on Me, but I do as the Father has commanded Me…” Jesus knew that in the last days leading up to the cross Satan was going to attack Him and His disciples. And Jesus was prepared to do battle. That’s why He went to the Garden to pray.

As we read thru this whole passage we will see that Jesus is trying to teach His disciples a spiritual lesson. And here it is: Satan is going to attack you in your weakest areas and at your weakest moments. You must be on the alert and prepare yourselves spiritually for those attacks. But before He can teach His disciples these spiritual principles, our Lord will apply them to His own life. And that’s what’s going on here. Satan is attacking Jesus in His weak area – in His human weakness, in His flesh. And Jesus recognizes it and He goes to His Father in prayer.

Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus was tempted in all ways as we are, yet without sin. Jesus knows what His disciples will go thru and what we go thru because, He’s been there. At this moment in Matthew 26, Jesus Himself is experiencing Satanic attack. He knows it’s a very real problem that could lead to spiritual disaster if were are not prepared.

Well Round One is done. Jesus makes His way back to where He left Peter, James and John…

READ Matthew 26:40-41

Jesus knows the temptation His disciples, and specifically here He is talking to Peter, are going to be facing even if they seem oblivious to it. They’re not worried. They’re sleeping. And who can blame them. It’s nighttime, they’ve just eaten a big meal and had a busy day. Physically, they’re exhausted and so they fall asleep. But Jesus knows what’s about to happen. He’s already warned them about it. But they’re not concerned. They’re self-confident. Jesus wants them to be spiritually prepared for when Satan’s attack comes. It’s just around the corner. So Jesus tells them to “Watch and pray” so that they will not enter into temptation later on.

V 41, “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” What a profound statement! As believers we have a serious problem and we are going to have this problem until the day we meet our Lord. We have a regenerated, renewed spirit. It’s a willing spirit. It desires to do what is right. Oh, we have such good intentions for God. But we also have a weak flesh. We lust, we covet, we think wrong thoughts. Our human-ness is so weak! Paul talked about this inner conflict between his flesh and his spirit in Romans Chapter 7: “For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.” There is a spiritual battle taking place. “O wretched man that I am!” Paul goes on to tell us that only Christ can deliver us from “this body of death.”

And Jesus Christ is trying to help His disciples out. He knows what’s going to happen. He knows Satan is going to attack them. And He is trying to get them to prepare themselves spiritually for it. And how is that to be done? Thru prayer. That’ how He did it. That’s how He wants His disciples to do it. And that is how He wants us to do it. “Watch and pray.”

READ Matthew 26:42-43

Round Two, the battle with Satan continues in the life of our Lord. More prayer is needed – we see the same intimacy, a little more resignation to the reality of what He must face, same submission to the Father’s will.

Then He goes back to His disciples. Have they learned their lesson? Are they watching and praying? No. Jesus finds them asleep again. So what does Jesus tell his weary disciples the second time?

READ Matthew 26:44

He says nothing to His disciples the second time. He just lets them sleep and He goes back for another intimate pouring out of His heart to His Father. The disciples are not prepared for the temptation that is about to overtake them. Why not? Because they are not watching and praying like Jesus instructed them to do.

Matthew tells us that Jesus’ third prayer is the same as before: “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” Jesus is prepared now. He is ready to do spiritual battle. He is ready to face the lies of the enemy. He is ready to do the Father’s will. He ready to go to the cross for you and for me. He’s prepared.

READ Matthew 26:45-46

Jesus hears footsteps. He sees the light from the lanterns and torches flickering behind the silhouettes of olive trees as a group of men make their way up the hill toward Jesus. “Rise, let us be going” is not an indication of fear and running away. Not at all. Jesus and His disciples move toward the group and there’s an intimate greeting that takes place between Jesus and Judas. John records that Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, "Whom do you seek?" They answered him, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus said to them, "I am He." Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, "I am He," they drew back and fell to the ground. So He asked them again, "Whom do you seek?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus answered, "I told you that I am He. So, if you seek me, let these men go." And so they arrested Jesus.

There is this incident recorded at the arrest of Jesus where Peter picks up a sword and whacks off the right ear of Malchus, the servant of the high priest. So Peter’s first temptation wasn’t to deny Jesus, but it was to fight back. Jesus restores Malchus’ ear and rebukes Peter. Peter wasn’t spiritually prepared for the moment. He was operating in his own flesh and his own limited understanding.

So what are the spiritual lessons for us from the Garden? There is a recipe for spiritual disaster and here it is: self-confidence (“I will never deny You, Lord”), sleep (why bother to be alert?), temptation, sin, disaster! Oh, but there is a recipe for spiritual victory: humility (dependence on God), prayer, temptation, obedience (doing God’s will), victory.

Lessons from the Garden!