

Text: Luke 22:39-46

March 2, 2008

Theme: Some battles call for a fight. Some battles require a surrender. So we pray.

Title: ***Getting Help to the Front Line***

If you were asked to name the most important spot in Christianity, what would you say?
Where would it be?

Bethlehem? Perhaps Nazareth, where Jesus grew up and launched His ministry? Could it be Golgotha? Or the empty tomb?

All of these are important. But I want to invite you today to the turning point place where the battle was won: to Jesus' place of prayer, a garden called Gethsemane on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley less than two-tenths of a mile outside the eastern walls of Jerusalem.

Because it was here in the place of prayer where Jesus drew courage to go to the cross. It was here—in the “place of crushing”, what “Gethsemane” literally means—that Jesus surrendered His will. It was here in prayer where Jesus made the decision that He would rather endure all the force of hell for you than to go to heaven without you.

And Jesus' place of prayer is important because He went there a lot. “Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives,” Luke writes. (22:39) The place of prayer was a favorite, familiar place to Jesus, which is what made Judas so important to the enemies of Christ.

Jesus had managed to slip through the crowds in the daylight, foiling plans to capture Him. But away from others at night, He would be easier to snatch. Judas probably led them first back to the upper room, where they had just celebrated the Passover. But discovering them not there, maybe he thought, “Wait a minute. Gethsemane. He loves to pray there. That's where Jesus would like to be on a night like this.”

Jesus' life of prayer, His place of prayer was the one constant those close to Him had come to count on.

Now a mob slinks through the streets of Jerusalem led by the twelfth disciple whose feet have just been washed by the One he is about to betray. Jesus and the other eleven have walked down roads lined with the fires and tents of Passover pilgrims, on their way, unknowingly at the time, right up to the very edge of a cosmic confrontation, the forward-most line of conflict where Jesus would win, but where first His friends would this time lose and learn a very important lesson about prayer that is ours to learn again today: that some battles call for a fight, and so we pray.

“On reaching the place,” Luke records, “[Jesus] said to them, ‘Pray that you will not fall into temptation.’” (Luke 22:40)

The battle we all fight against temptation: some of the last instruction Jesus would give His closest friends, and some of the most important—in both cases given in the context of prayer.

First, in the Lord's Prayer, where Jesus urged the disciples to pray to God that we would not enter into temptation. And then here, twice appealing to them to pray that

they would not fall into temptation. This battle calls for a fight, so we pray. The battle with temptation is as old as the Garden of Eden and as new as lunch in a few hours/minutes when the waitress may ask, “Can I tempt anyone with some dessert?”

Temptation is an old struggle, and it is everyone’s struggle: the monk and businessman, the mother at home and the salesman on the road, the high school student and the senior adult, the layperson and the pastor all deal with temptation.

I Corinthians 10:13 says, “No temptation has seized you except what is common to [all people].”

Temptation is not sin. Even Jesus was tempted by Satan. Giving into temptation is sin: “falling into temptation,” as Jesus said, what we pray to resist.

Temptation doesn’t prove you’re evil, just that you’re human. Being intimidated by temptation only makes Satan’s tactics more effective. In fact, the more you commit your life to Christ, the more the enemy will try to tempt you.

But one thing we have to our advantage is the predictability of temptation.

The evil one’s three key strategies at this front line where we live are summarized there in your sermon notes from I John 2:16: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.

Satan followed this temptation strategy in the Garden of Eden, offering the fruit that would be “good for food”—lust of the flesh; Adam and Eve recognized it to be “pleasing to the eye”—lust of the eyes; and the fruit was “desirable for gaining wisdom”—the pride of life.

Satan tried to tempt Jesus in the desert following the same tactic, challenging Him to “tell this stone to become bread”—his physical craving, lust of the flesh; looking out from the pinnacle of the temple upon the kingdoms “that will all be yours”—material attraction, lust of the eyes; and challenging him to “throw yourself down from here”—the temptation to be spectacular and powerful, the pride of life.

Temptation always works this way: through pleasure, possessions, and position, luring us to indulge, to increase, to impress.

And often our first reaction to temptation is to excuse ourselves or blame something or someone else, just like Adam blamed Eve in the first temptation, Genesis 3:12: “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

But temptation is more like a mugger on a dark street, hidden and motionless, staring you down and positioned to lunge at your unguarded moment.

You’re hit, you take the bait. Excuses don’t really matter then.

And when you take off the attacker’s mask, the face you see is your own: your own desires, your responsibility.

James 1:14 says, “Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.”

Temptation occurs when in our minds we are enticed to disobey God, something Satan makes to look attractive.

And if, at that moment, we don’t put it out of our minds, the desire will be conceived in action and grow. What looked so appealing matures into something that always disappoints, always leads to more problems and less of life.

So Jesus teaches, “Pray that you will not fall into temptation.” These battles call for a

fight, so we pray.

We form the reflex that when temptation first comes, we replace it with prayer. The moment temptation first comes to minds, we counter with a quick prayer, constant prayer.

“God, there’s the thought again. But I return to you right now, Father God, for the strength to wait as it passes. Stir up my conscience to remember what is true. Enlarge the consequences so I think long term about what this temptation could lead to. I bring it to you, God.”

In prayer, the Holy Spirit may bring to your recall a verse of Scripture that heads off that temptation. You may reach out to a friend who can pray with you briefly by phone. And there, in prayer, the battle is won.

Some battles call for a fight. Some battles require a surrender.

At the Mount of Olives, Jesus left eight at the entrance of the Garden. Peter and the sons of Zebedee, James and John, came farther inside Gethsemane and closer to Jesus’ anguish.

From there, “[Jesus] withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them,” Luke writes. “[He] knelt down and prayed.” (Luke 22:21) It became intense, a great war waging inside the soul of the Son of God.

It’s Luke, a physician, who gives us the detail of Jesus praying with such torment that his sweat became like blood (22:44), a medical condition called hematidrosis in which, under extreme stress, the capillaries dilate to the point where they burst, releasing blood through the sweat glands.

Jesus could lay it out that raw in prayer now because He had been with His Father in prayer so much all along.

Over and over, as was His custom, Jesus spent time again and again in prayer. Early in the morning, rising before dawn, on the mountain, sometimes all night long, in a solitary place: Jesus prayed. So that now, at the most important, agonizing moment of all, Jesus could pray.

I have talked many times about what was perhaps the most defining moment of my childhood: a terrible car accident our family was involved in. Mom lost part of her left ear and would take 350 stitches to her face. My Dad almost died, pinned in the car for an hour.

And I’ll never forget that hour: my sister, Debbie, and I sitting in the back of a state police car, soaking wet, sheeting rain outside, emergency lights flashing.

As we talked and cried and waited, through the tears Debbie said, “Dave, don’t you think we ought to pray or something?” And we took each others hands and prayed. She was 15; I was 9.

But we could pray in that police car, in that distress, because there had been prayers at the table, prayers kneeling at the couch as a family, prayers at the bedside. So when the emergency came, it wasn’t unnatural to say, “Don’t you think we ought to pray?”

It was Jesus’ custom to pray, to face His battles in prayer, even battles like this one that would require a surrender.

The world had rejected Jesus. Eventually the disciples would forsake Him. And in

prayer, this tortured praying that seemed to meet a stone wall of no response, it must have felt as if His heavenly Father, too, had turned away.

And in that struggle, Jesus surrendered. “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth,” Hebrews 5 says, “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.” (Hebrew 5:7)

Which is why Gethsemane is the place where the battle was won—this kind of battle that requires a surrender.

D. L. Moody once said, “The sweetest lesson I have learned in God’s school of prayer is to let Him choose for me.”

“Anyone who intends to come with me,” Jesus said, “has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat—I am”: Luke 9:23. [*The Message*]

The one battle you and I have to lose in life is in wrestling with God

Prayer is not a tug-of-war with God. We think we’re waiting on God to answer, while God is usually waiting on us, on our obedience and change, our surrender.

If the request is wrong, God says, “No.” If the timing is wrong, God says, “Slow.” If you are wrong, God says, “Grow.” But if the request is right and the timing is right and you are right, God says, “Go.”

Jesus was changed when He lifted His sweaty face off that dirt.

We didn’t read this part, but Judas next comes with probably up to sixty soldiers carrying swords and clubs to betray Jesus. If you’re betrayed, the reflex is to retaliate.

But Jesus had prayed. He says to Judas, “Friend, do what you came for.” (Matthew 26:50)

It is an embarrassment even to be pulled over for a traffic ticket. Arrested people hide their faces from the camera.

But the Son of God had just prayed. So when He was arrested and brutally taken away as His friends scattered, He stayed calm: “Am I leading a rebellion that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me?” No bitterness. No shame.

Simply amazing strength and self-control under the gun after prayer where the battle was won in surrender to the will of God, such an incredible contrast with who Jesus was as He entered those Garden gates.

Sometimes in prayer, God will change the situation. But so much, the battle is won in changing us, in strengthening us from our surrender to God.

“Do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger people,” Al Gwinn used to say as he concluded worship each Sunday. “Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for powers equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work will be no miracle, but you will be the miracle.”

Some battles call for a fight. Some battles require a surrender. So we pray.

And from the prayer of Jesus we learn that there, in closer relationship with God, which is prayer, we find the strength to do what the struggle demands.

That is what these coming moments are for in communion: drawing closer in relationship with God to be fed by the real food of Jesus’ sacrifice to face life’s battles and win.

The frontline may be out there waiting for you. But right here—the place of prayer—is where the battle is won.

Sources:

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