

Why Gethsemane's Agony?

MARK 14:32-42

"Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation." Matthew 26:41

Following the institution of the Supper which memorializes His death, Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn, and then went out of the city to the Mount of Olives opposite—a distance of perhaps a mile. Apparently several important lessons were given to the disciples en route to Gethsemane. These St. John's Gospel records in Chapters 15-17.

The word Gethsemane signifies an oil press—a name that is full of significance. When we remember that the Jews used the oil of the olives both for food and for light, and that Jesus is the Nourisher as well as the Enlightener of the world, we see a special fitness in His having His trying experiences, which almost crushed His soul, in a garden used for the crushing of olives and the extraction of their oil.

Gethsemane was not a flower garden, but an olive orchard or garden. The supposed site is still carefully preserved, and guarded by Franciscan monks. In the Garden are some very ancient olive trees and one extremely old oak. The Garden is supposed to have belonged to some of Jesus' friends; and there is claimed to be some evidence that John Mark, the writer of the Gospel of St. Mark, was the lad who was awakened from his slumbers by the commotion incident to Jesus' arrest and who came forth in his nightgown. (Mark 14:51, 52)

A Note Of Warning

En route for Gethsemane, Jesus sought to impress upon his disciples the fact that they were entering a great crisis. He quoted to them the prophecy, "I will smite the Shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered." (Zech. 13:7) He said to them plainly that as a result they would all be offended—discouraged, stumbled, amazed. The

thing that they were not expecting would occur.

St. Peter, full of confidence in his own devotion to the Lord, denied this, declaring that it would not be true in his case—that even though it should be true of all the others, he was ready to die with the Master, rather than to deny Him. Jesus still insisted that St. Peter was in great danger. He was trusting too much to his flesh, and not looking to God and prayerfully watching against temptation. Indeed, all the disciples joined in the same remonstrance against the accusation that Jesus had made. They declared themselves loyal and ready for death. How little they knew what severe trials would come upon them!

Surely there is a lesson here for all the followers of Jesus—today as well as then. It is right that we should feel ourselves thoroughly determined to be loyal to the Lord's Cause to our very last breath; for such a determination is very necessary to victory. The mistake made by many is in not realizing how severe the trials and temptations may become—in not realizing the necessity of Heavenly assistance in our every time of need. The Apostle wrote, "When I am weak, then am I strong." (2 Cor. 12:10) By this he doubtless meant, When fully loyal to the Lord, I feel my own weakness and insufficiency, but I am strong because then I rely especially upon Heavenly aid—then I watch and pray, and am thus forewarned against the temptations.

Doubtless in the end of this Age—in the closing days of this Gospel Dispensation—there will come Gethsemane experiences to the Church of Christ. Those who will stand those temptations and trials, and come off victorious, will be the ones whose faith and trust in the Lord are strong—those who watch and pray lest they enter into temptation, and who are thus safeguarded against

it. As our Lord forewarned St. Peter and the other Apostles of their coming trial, so He has forewarned us of the great crucial test near at hand. Let us profit by the experiences of the Apostles recorded in this lesson.

“Sorrowful Even Unto Death”

Arrived at the Garden, Jesus left eight of the Apostles near the entrance, and went further into its shades with Peter, James and John. All were to watch, to be on guard against something that was to occur, something of which Jesus knew, but which seemed most improbable to the Apostles. They were unable to comprehend the Master's pessimism, even though they sympathized with Him.

It was midnight, and they were accustomed to retiring early. The strain of the evening, and the weighty lessons which the Master had imparted, reacted in drowsiness. They slept, instead of watching and praying. This was true even of the three nearest to the Master.

Wishing to be alone in His communion with the Father, Jesus went a stone's throw farther into the shades by Himself. Time and again, in the agony which came upon Him, He came seeking human sympathy, only to find His dearest ones oblivious in sleep. Well had it been expressed by the Prophet, “Of the people there was none with me.” (Isa. 63:3) He trod the winepress of grief alone.

Not until He had finished giving admonitions to His Apostles and had left some to watch at the entrance of the garden, did the Master seem to give special thought to Himself and to the momentous events anticipated within a few hours. As He was leaving His favorite three, He gave utterance to the weight of oppression which seemed suddenly to rest down upon His soul. He exclaimed, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death!”—I feel as if I would die now, without coming to that great crisis which is before Me. We read that “He was greatly amazed and sore troubled.” The Greek is equally strong, signify-

ing utter amazement and sore trouble, carrying the thought of loneliness, homesickness, friendlessness.

This feeling of wretchedness, despair, which suddenly came upon the Savior, continued for some time; for He went in prayer to the Father three times, petitioning that this hour might pass from Him, this terrible oppression which was breaking His heart. The Evangelist Luke, who was a physician, tells that the Master's distress was such that it brought on a bloody sweat. Although this record respecting the bloody sweat is not found in some of the older manuscripts, nevertheless physicians agree that such experiences have occurred to others in great distress.

The Cause Of The Master's Sorrow

How shall we explain the great distress of the Master in anticipation of His own death, of which He had knowledge in advance and of which He had told His disciples, assuring them also, as in this lesson, that He would arise from the dead on the third day? Why should the thought of death have so much more terror for the Redeemer than it has had for some of His followers, yes, than it has had for people in general?

Hundreds of martyrs have gone to deaths equally terrible or more so. Hundreds have exhibited great courage, fortitude, in the face of equally horrible deaths. How shall we account for this attitude of the Savior and His so earnestly praying that the hour or the cup might pass from Him?

In order to appreciate this question and its proper answer, we must remember how different was the Master from all the remainder of mankind. A death sentence rests upon all the world. We all know that it is merely a question of time when we shall die. We all know that the dying process can last but a few hours at most. Not only have we no hope of escaping death, but by reason of being nine-tenths dead already our intelligent faculties are more or less benumbed. We are more or less reckless, careless, and proportionately fierce.

Exhibition of True Courage

There are soldiers who will rush to battle in the face of instant death with apparently not a fear, and there are horses which will do the same thing. The greatest courage, however, is manifested by those who know, understand, appreciate fully, just what they are doing and who greatly fear death, but who notwithstanding press onward in obedience to the command of duty and of love. Jesus was such a soldier. He comprehended, as others had not comprehended, what death really is. He appreciated, as others did not appreciate, the meaning and value of life.

Jesus had left the Heavenly glory, divesting Himself of the higher nature on the spirit plane, exchanging it for the human nature, because man had sinned and because in the Divine purpose and arrangement He was to die, the Just for the unjust, as man's Redemption-price. This was the Father's will concerning Him. He tells us that for this purpose He came into the world. This thought dominated His entire life. Daily He was laying down His life, in doing the will of God and in serving humanity. Now He had come to the great climax.

The Heavenly Father had promised that if our Lord was faithful in this work given Him to do, He would be raised from the dead by Divine Power to the spirit plane of being and to a station still higher than He had before. He doubted not the Father's faithfulness in this matter, nor did he doubt the Father's Power. But the Father's provision and promise were conditional; only if our Lord would perform His part faithfully would He receive the resurrection to the higher life. If in any sense or degree, great or small, He should yield to sin, the penalty for sin would be upon Him—"Dying, thou shalt die."

For three and one-half years His life had been devoted to God and to the doing of the Divine will. The only question was, Had He done the Divine will fully, com-

pletely, and absolutely, in such a spirit as had been pleasing to the Heavenly Father? More than this, could He, would He, pass through the experiences of the next few hours with proper courage, proper faith, proper obedience; or would He fail, and lose His all in death?

No Advocate For The Master

Thus we see how different it was with the Master from what it is with any of us who seek to walk in His steps. We have nothing to lose; for as a race we are all under sentence of death. Besides, the followers of Jesus realize that He was the Son of God who died for our sins, and that His merit compensates for our imperfections because we abide in Him and desire to do the Father's will.

But had the Master failed, there was no one to make good for Him. His failure meant everlasting death. Moreover, it meant the loss of all those special blessings which God had promised Him as a reward for special faithfulness. It meant the loss of the great privilege of doing the Father's work in uplifting humanity from sin and death conditions through the Messianic Kingdom. In a word, the Master's personal eternal life was in the balance that night in Gethsemane, as also were all His prospects of glory, honor, immortality and high exaltation at the right hand of the Father, far above angels, principalities and powers.

No wonder the Master, realizing all this, was overwhelmed with the thought! No wonder He wished that if it were possible for the Divine Plan to be otherwise worked out, He might be saved from, spared from, the special tribulations and horrible experiences of the hours just before Him! Part of the horrors of that experience surely was the fact that He must be dealt with as a malefactor, as a blasphemer of God, as an enemy of God and of righteousness.

What Our Lord Dreaded

To a debased and depraved soul, this would mean little; but to One full of love and loyalty to the Father such experiences

would be terrible—that He who had sacrificed His all, even His Heavenly glory and His earthly interests, to do the Father's will, should be considered a blasphemer of God, and that He should be crucified as a malefactor, an injurious person! What a terrible experience to one of the refinement and nobility of soul which Jesus possessed, of whom we read that He “was holy, harmless, undefiled and separate from sinners”!

Apparently this ignominy was the thing which Jesus prayed might pass away. He did not pray that He might not die; for He knew that He had come into the world for that purpose, and that only by His death could the death penalty resting against the human family be removed. He had been talking about His death repeatedly; He had not once thought of escaping death. He well knew that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God.” But He did hope that the Father might have some way of passing by the special ignominy of that hour. Yet even in His greatest distress the Master prayed, “Nevertheless not My will, but Thine, be done.”

St. Paul assures us that the Master's Gethsemane experiences were linked with fear—not fear of dying, but fear of remaining dead, fear that He would not be accounted of the Father worthy of that glorious resurrection which had been promised to Him on condition of absolute obedience. St. Paul says, “Who in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him out of death [by resurrection], was heard in respect to the things which He feared.” (Heb. 5:7) He was saved out of death; and more than this, He was given the assurance by the Father that He would be saved out of death.

Strengthened From On High

This is the explanation of the statement that an angel of God appeared to Him in the Garden and strengthened Him—gave Him the assurance from the Father that He had been faithful up to that moment, and that the Divine blessing would be with Him in the hour of trial just at hand. From that moment onward, all the fear and agony were gone. If the Father had approved Him thus far, and if the Father's blessing and smile went with Him, He could endure all things, come what might. Throughout the remainder of that night and the following day, Jesus was the calmest of the calm, under the most trying circumstances. He comforted those who wept about Him; He committed His mother to the faithful St. John, etc.

In these experiences of the Master, we find more or less a repetition in His disciples. When assured that their sins are forgiven, that the Father Himself loves them, that His grace is sufficient for them, and that the Redeemer's robe of righteousness covers them, the followers of Jesus can, under such circumstances, be courageous, even while dreading death.

One great difference between the Master and His followers should be remembered: Whereas “of the people there were none” with Him, with us it is different; the Master is with us, saying, “I will never leave thee nor forsake thee.” Moreover, with us also there is a fellowship of spirit amongst the brethren of Christ, whose words of encouragement by the way, as they watch with us and pray with us, are a source of strength in every time of trouble. Thanking Him for all the Divine provision and arrangements, let us go onward to our Gethsemane, strong in the strength which God supplies through His Son.