

Jesus' Prayer in the Garden

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A few years ago, a study came out in which a group of scientists examined the ability of people to correctly estimate the probability of disaster. The scientists calculated the likelihood of a series of real-world disasters, everything from a tornado to a long-term disability. Then, they asked the test subjects to assign their own probabilities to those disasters. In every case, the subjects believed that a disaster was much less likely than it actually was. That's why over the past five years, we've seen levees in New Orleans overtopped by a hurricane storm surge, the worldwide financial system melt down, and nuclear reactors in Japan get swamped by a tsunami. In all of those cases, the people charged with guarding against failure didn't believe that the worst-case scenario could actually happen, until it did happen.

In our personal estimation of risk, we are no better. Our brains just aren't wired to appreciate how precarious our situation actually is. However, our inability to appreciate reality doesn't change it. Sooner or later, we are going to be surprised by disaster, so that the thing we thought would never happen to us does.

What do we do then? What do we do when we get the news from the oncologist that our entire body is consumed by cancer, and we have only a couple of months to live? What do we do when we lose a spouse, or a child? Prayer is the obvious answer, but what do we do when what we want is something that we know God isn't willing to grant? I sure would love to see my daughter Macy again, but I know that God won't raise her from the dead now, no matter how hard I pray. In this, as in so many other things, we can learn from the example of our Lord. As we so often do, He too had to face an inescapable disaster: His imminent death on the cross. He was just as broken up about it as we are, but He was still able to rise above His reality. Let's look at how He did it.. Let's look at Jesus' prayer in the garden.

Background.

We can only truly appreciate Jesus' prayer by considering its background. One of the most telling verses about what Jesus knew is Revelation 13:8. At first glance, this strikes us as an odd description for our Lord. After all, He didn't literally die before the foundation of the world. He died on the cross, 2000 years ago. However, that's not the point that John is making. There was a movie that came out a few years ago called "Dead Man Walking", and it took its title from the fact that even though prisoners on death row were still alive, they were condemned to death, and that death was so certain that they were like dead men walking around. That's the situation that Jesus was in, not just during His time on earth, but before the earth was even created. Our sin didn't come as a surprise to God. Before Adam took his first breath, God knew that our sin was going to require a sacrifice, and that sacrifice was going to have to be Jesus. Most likely, the knowledge that He was going to die on the cross has always been the defining fact of Jesus' existence.

Nor was this grim foreshadowing something that Jesus was able to shake off during His ministry. Indeed, the opposite was true, as we see from Mark 8:31-32. Jesus here didn't tell His disciples, "there's a possibility that the chief priests and elders might want to kill Me soon." He didn't conceal His meaning behind heaps of vague language. He plainly told His closest followers that His life was going to end with suffering and death at the hands of His enemies. This must have been a horrifying thing for His disciples to hear, just like it would be horrifying for any of us to hear a friend or loved one predict his imminent death. It doesn't take much imagination to see the look of shock and concern on Peter's face as he pulls Jesus aside to rebuke Him. That didn't change the fact that Jesus was right, and He knew it.

Indeed, Jesus' appreciation of the disaster that was looming over Him is clearly evident in His prayers, as we see in John 12:27. Jesus utters these words just a few days before His crucifixion, and it's evident that His knowledge of what is about to happen is weighing on Him. However, He knows just as surely that He isn't going to get out from under it. It's not like His death was going to be some unfortunate accident, and He could accomplish His mission on earth without it. Instead, from the very beginning, His death was the purpose of His mission. If He wanted to save mankind from sin and eternal damnation, He was going to have to die to do it. That was the very essence of the Father's plan for Him. In circumstances like those, then, what was the point of praying to the Father for rescue? In order for Jesus to be saved, the world would have to be lost. Despite His power, despite His faith, Jesus was stuck right where He was.

Jesus' Prayer.

Now that we understand what Jesus' situation was, we can turn our attention to the prayer itself. We learn about Jesus' mental state immediately before His prayer from Mark 14:32-34. It's quite evident here that the pressure that Jesus was under has grown even more intense. He leaves most of His disciples behind, and then, in the company of those who were closest to Him, He basically loses it. He tells them that He's so torn up about what's going to happen that it's just about to kill Him on the spot. He begins this prayer, then, at the most despairing place that a human being can reach.

Unless somehow we die instantaneously and predecease everyone we care about, we are also going to come to our own personal garden of Gethsemane. We too will offer a prayer to God that is borne up from the uttermost depths of despair. I worry that some Christians have the idea that they have to be happy happy happy all the time, that when they're sitting in the front row at the funeral home, surveying the remains of a loved one, that they have to paste a smile on and exclaim how delighted they are with God's will. Brethren, simply because God is perfect does not mean that we must deny the pain of an imperfect world. If Jesus was afraid and upset, then we have the right to be afraid and upset too.

We learn even more about where Jesus was from the words of His prayer, recorded in Mark 14:35-36. As we've seen earlier, Jesus knew, knew beyond a shadow of a doubt, that He was about to die in a cruel and agonizing way. However, that doesn't keep Him from one of the most moving displays of His humanity that we see in Scripture. Just like when we receive the terminal diagnosis from the doctor, and we shake our heads and insist that he must have missed something, Jesus is doing the same thing. Even though an omniscient God had eternity to come up with a better plan and didn't, Jesus is still hoping that somehow, some way, His Father can rescue Him. However, what's most important to Him is that God's will be done, and in the final analysis, Jesus knows that that's what's going to happen.

We're allowed to pray in the same way when we're facing something similarly awful. When we're sitting in the ICU, watching our loved one sink lower and lower, even if we know what's going to happen, we're still allowed to pray for what we want. God will listen even to the expression of our denial, if that's where we are, if that's what we need. However, we must not allow our denial to change our acknowledgement of God's will. We live in a world that has been marred by sin almost from the very beginning, and none of us have the right to demand an indefinite span of happiness for ourselves, our families, and our friends. Every good thing that we enjoy on this earth must end, just as the earth itself must come to an end. I love my family. I cherish every day I have with them. However, the number of those days is limited, and whether I reach the end in five years or fifty, that end is inevitable. We can rage against God for taking from us the blessings that we believe we're entitled to, or we can bow to His will, but in the end, that will is what will be done.

We see another reason why Jesus chose to pray in this way in Mark 14:37-38. When Jesus rebukes Peter for sleeping and warns him to pray as a shield against temptation, that gives us insight into Jesus' own thought processes. Even at this stage of the game, Satan wasn't going to leave Jesus alone. With every step that led to the cross, Jesus was aware that He could call all the angelic armies of heaven to rescue Him. In turning to His Father, again and again, Jesus was seeking the reserves of strength that could sustain Him in His final hours.

In our despair, we also need to remember to use prayer against temptation. We don't have 12 legions of angels at our beck and call, but Satan doesn't leave us alone either. Even though we most likely don't have the capacity to rescue ourselves, we always have the option to do what Job's wife advises him to do in Job 2, to curse God and die because of the greatness of our trials. I've seen this before, in people who are facing some overwhelming adversity. They get the idea that because God has allowed this to happen to them, that He's betrayed them somehow. In reality, of course, God has never promised any of us unlimited earthly joy, and He can't break a promise that He never made. We need to guard against the temptation to believe otherwise by returning to Him repeatedly, even if only for comfort in calamity.

Prayer in Our Lives

All of this should have a profound effect on the way that we see and use prayer in our lives. For one thing, just because we feel like we're in the garden of Gethsemane doesn't mean that we're actually there yet. Look, for example, at the situation Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 1:8-10. We don't know exactly what the situation was here, yet it's evident that whatever it was, it brought Paul to his knees. As he says here, his primary hope at that point wasn't that God would rescue him from his peril, but that God would raise him from the dead at the resurrection of the righteous. However, much to the surprise of Paul and his companions, the worst thing that happened to him was that he had to modify his traveling schedule. Even though human ingenuity couldn't see a way out of the trouble they were in, God could.

Sometimes, this can be our situation too. We come to God in despair, but God knows that we have much more reason to hope than we think we do. Unlike Jesus, we don't know what the final hour will be for us or any of our loved ones. I don't believe that God will raise any more dead people between now and the day of judgment, but I am firmly convinced that He gives new life to people who should be dead. Sometimes, we simply need to trust Him more.

Second, though, if we have indeed reached a Gethsemane moment, building that relationship with God through prayer will bless us with the serenity to get through it. Look at how Paul expresses his confidence in God in 2 Timothy 4:18. This is a dramatic statement of faith, but it's even more dramatic in the context of 2 Timothy 4:6-7. Paul knew on the one hand that he was about to be killed, but on the other hand, he trusted in God's power to bring him safely to heaven. Sooner or later, just about every life will know disaster and despair, but what determines the extent of that disaster is our faith. Jesus suffered and died, it is true, but it is equally true that three days later, God raised Him from the dead, and He ascended to reign from the throne of God in heaven until the end of time. As His disciples, we follow in his footsteps. Even our Gethsemane moments only prefigure the day when our tombs will be found empty.