
At Midnight In the Garden

“And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. Then He said to them, ‘My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me’” (Matthew 26:37, 38).

Sometime around midnight, Jesus entered the garden called Gethsemane—a place where olives must have been processed, for the word meant “oil press.” In the early part of the evening, He had washed His disciples’ feet (John 13:5–15), teaching them the lessons of humility and service. He had kept the Passover with His apostles and had instituted the supper that would commemorate His death throughout the Christian Age (Matthew 26:26–29). After keeping that supper, He gave His disciples the farewell speeches (John 15; 16). At the end of this sorrowful goodbye, He prayed the great high priestly prayer given in John 17.

As the midnight hour drew near (or maybe passed), He and His apostles left for Gethsemane. They went into the Valley of Hinnom and crossed the Brook Kidron, which was no doubt tinged red with the blood that had run into it from the slaughter and sacrificing of countless paschal lambs at the temple. Soon they approached the entrance to a garden that lay somewhere along the foot of the Mount of Olives. It must have been a plot of ground dotted with olive trees, a place to which He had often retreated for prayer. Perhaps He knew the owner of the garden and had obtained permission to use it as a place of solitude and private prayer.

At the entrance, He left eight of the apostles, taking with Him only Peter, James, and John as He went farther into the garden. The olive trees that surrounded them rustled gently in the night breeze. The midnight hour brought an eerie coldness and a gloomy darkness to the

place as the trees shielded the damp ground from most of the moonlight. He asked the three chosen disciples to watch with Him, for He was going a short distance from them for prayer.

Jesus rarely spoke of the emotions that surged at times within His soul. The Gospel Accounts tell us what He did, describing some of His actions and movements in detail; but the writers very seldom attempted to describe His inner feelings. We are limited to only brief insights into the emotions that filled His heart. We read of His groaning at the tomb of Lazarus, when He saw the tears of Mary and Martha (John 11:33). He became distressed and troubled over what He saw. Upon reaching the brow of the Mount of Olives on His entry into Jerusalem, He looked at the city and wept (Luke 19:41). He wept audibly over what He knew the people were going to do. When Jesus met with His apostles in the upper room, “He became troubled in spirit, and testified and said, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, that one of you will betray Me’” (John 13:21). These are moving scenes; and, because of their rarity, they stand out like mountain peaks in His ministry.

In Gethsemane, however, we see the heart of Jesus as never before. A brief but vivid portrayal of it is given in Hebrews 5:7: “In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety.” Here is a heart-rending picture of the emotional struggle and the heavy spirit that filled Him in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke, with six phrases,¹ conveyed His intense inner struggle and pain. At times they quoted Him as He reported to His dearest companions what was going on within Him. At other times, the writers described what they perceived in Him. In this garden Jesus experienced something that He had never before encountered during His earthly life and ministry. We cannot understand what was happening, but can only faintly imagine it.

The struggle Jesus experienced involved intense sorrow. He told the three whom He had taken with Him that His soul was “deeply grieved” (Matthew 26:38). The word He used, *perilupos* (περίλυπος), conveys the thought of deep sadness. As He drew closer to the time when He would carry that awful burden of sin upon His soul at the cross, He became overwhelmed. The world’s guilt was descending upon His pure, innocent mind and heart with a crushing force.

His struggle had a distressing nature. Mark reported that He “began to be very distressed” (Mark 14:33). The word translated “distressed” (ἐκθαμβέω, *ekthambeo*) could also be translated “alarmed.” Jesus was God in the flesh; He was both the Son of God and the Son of Man. He had become fully man, but He was still the second member of the Godhead. The battle for the salvation of the human race loomed large, dark, and frightful. His humanity was depressed by it; His divine spirit groaned over it.

His struggle in the garden was the heaviest burden He had ever borne. He began to “be very . . . troubled” (Mark 14:33). “Troubled” (ἀδημονέω, *ademoneo*), or “very heavy” (KJV), means that His soul was weighed down with the magnitude of the event that was approaching. His spirit was staggering under the overpowering load.

His struggle was so severe that it began taking His physical body down to death itself. His soul was “deeply grieved, to the point of death,” He said (Matthew 26:38; emphasis mine). So consuming were His sorrow and grief that there was a danger that His body would give way

under the stress. This toll on His body must be the reason that “an angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him” (Luke 22:43). Had He not received strength, He would not have been able to offer His body on the cross for us. It would have collapsed before it could be crucified.

His struggle was characterized by agony. Luke said, “And being in agony He was praying very fervently” (Luke 22:44a). His word was *agonia* (ἀγωνία), a word that expresses a painful contest, a straining with all one’s energy. We can easily see the excruciating suffering of the crucifixion, but we do not often see the awful agony of Gethsemane. As Jesus prepared His soul for the conflict over the souls of men, He entered into an agony that no one can comprehend. We catch a glimpse of it in the statement that His sweat became “like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground” (Luke 22:44). The Holy Spirit used only a part of a sentence to tell how Jesus’ body reacted to the stress, strain, and power of His ordeal.

His struggle included loneliness. Jesus wanted to be with His disciples, but His need for prayer was greater. Even when He was separated from them, He desired that they be with Him in spirit and prayer. The disciples were weary from the emotional conversations of the evening, and their bodies coveted rest. Luke says that they were sleeping “from sorrow” (Luke 22:45). Their eyes had become heavy from physical exhaustion. Jesus must have sought their companionship and prayers that night more than any other time, but they slipped away into slumber. Jesus was left to face His awful hour alone.

His struggle involved the satanic forces of evil in a way that He had not confronted them before. After Jesus’ period of temptation at the beginning of His ministry, the devil left Him “for a season” (Luke 4:13; KJV). In this garden the devil came against Him with the mightiest army he could muster. Christ’s earlier confrontations with Satan did not have the immediacy and frightful character of this one. The terrors of the world of darkness were enveloping Jesus with tenacity.

No one can fathom the depths of grief our Lord experienced in this garden. We see His humanity rising to the challenge of the great strain, but we also see His divine nature. The

¹The synoptic Gospels indicate that Jesus was (1) “deeply grieved” (Matthew 26:38), (2) “grieved, to the point of death” (Matthew 26:38), (3) “very distressed” (Mark 14:33), (4) “very . . . troubled” (Mark 14:33), (5) “in agony . . . praying very fervently” (Luke 22:44), and that (6) “His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground” (Luke 22:44).

holy Son of God was preparing to become an atoning sacrifice for the world's sin.

At His time of great sorrow, Jesus sought to be with God. By His retreat to the garden, He tells us, "When you are in your deepest valley, your greatest conflict, be alone with your Father. Go to a quiet place, and lay your heart open before Him."

Even the Son of God found solace in His close friends. Out of His burdened heart, He asked His disciples to watch and pray with Him. Luke said that He "withdrew from them about a stone's throw" (Luke 22:41). The word he used for "withdrew" (ἀποσπάω, *apospao*) means "to tear oneself away." Knowing what they would face, He wanted them to pray about their impending trial. He also knew what He would soon undergo, and He wanted them to be near Him and to pray about what was coming.

Jesus illustrated another profound truth about our relationship with others. His example tells us, "When the heaviest burden comes, talk about it with those you hold dear." Jesus, God's almighty Son, told His close friends what He was undergoing. He revealed, with the strongest of words, His innermost agonies.

Above all, the account of our Lord in Gethsemane illustrates that the big battles of life are won the day before they take place. Jesus met with His Father and settled in advance what He was going to do and how He was going to do it when He reached the cross. After Gethsemane, He possessed serenity and absolute confidence. Who cannot be impressed by the way Jesus bore His sufferings? He prayed His way through them. At Gethsemane, the night before, Jesus resolved how He would handle Gabbatha and Golgotha.

Eddie Cloer



He drank a cup of wrath without mercy, that we might drink a cup of mercy without wrath. The agony was not the fear of death but the deep sense of God's wrath against sin which He was to bear. His pure and holy nature shrank, not from death as death, but from death as a curse of the world's sin.²

²J. Oswald Sanders, *The Incomparable Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1952), 144.