
“Watch And Pray”

“And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, ‘So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak’” (Matthew 26:40, 41).

Jesus approached the Garden of Gethsemane with a heart that was heavy with sorrow. He told three of His apostles, “My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death” (Matthew 26:38a).

Our Savior believed that companionship with His friends would bring Him strength and comfort in His time of great suffering. He chose, therefore, to take His eleven apostles with Him to this garden. He wanted them near Him, even though He knew that He would have to endure this avalanche of pain alone. Consequently, He placed eight of them near the gate, told them what He was going to do, and then charged them, “Pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Luke 22:40). Taking the other three, Peter, James, and John, He went farther into the garden (Matthew 26:37; Mark 14:32, 33). Under the shadows of the moonlight-gilded trees, He left them with this instruction: “Remain here and keep watch with Me” (Matthew 26:38b).

Carrying a burden that no human being could comprehend, He went a short distance from them and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will” (Matthew 26:39). After this period of fervent prayer, a time of supplication that was greater and deeper than the world had ever seen or heard, He returned to the three and found them sleeping. Those who were the closest to Him, those from whom He sought to draw crucial strength, had given in to their drowsiness. With a gentle rebuke, He spoke first to Peter, saying, “So, you men could

not keep watch with Me for one hour?” Then, perhaps, He looked at the other two as He said, “Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:40b, 41).

After He had returned to His lonely vigil of watching and praying, God sent an angel to strengthen Him (Luke 22:43). With this added energy, He prayed even more fervently. Falling upon His face before His Father, He prayed with loud crying and tears, “My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done” (Matthew 26:39, 42; Hebrews 5:7). After some time, He arose—drenched with sweat from expending so much of His energy in this fierce combat with the forces of darkness. Returning once more to the three, He found that they had fallen into sleep again. Luke wrote that they were sleeping from sorrow (Luke 22:45). When He awakened them, “they did not know what to answer Him” (Mark 14:40). Our Lord returned to His place of prayer and continued praying in holy resignation, “My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done” (Matthew 26:42, 44).

As Jesus concluded His third period of earnest prayer to His Father, flickering lights could be seen in the distance. A group was descending into the Kidron Valley. This mob, composed of soldiers and officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, carried torches, lanterns, swords, and clubs as they came winding through the night toward the foot of the Mount of Olives (Matthew 26:47; John 18:3). Jesus arose and returned to His three chosen apostles. He

said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners" (Matthew 26:45b). Mark added that He said, "It is enough; the hour has come" (Mark 14:41c). The NASB has made our Lord's statement into a question: "Are you still sleeping and resting?" The KJV honored the two imperatives in His words, translating what He said as a command: "Sleep on now, and take your rest." His thought must have been that it was too late to pray; the hour of His sacrifice was at hand. He was saying, "We must face this long-expected circumstance as we are. Either we have prepared ourselves for it with prayer and supplication, or we will find ourselves swallowed up by the devastating confrontations. Let us arise and be going" (see Mark 14:42).

This scene that we witness through the narratives of the Gospels not only shows us an unforgettable picture of our Savior, but it also puts His disciples in the spotlight, conveying their human frailty. We see His best men, His most highly trained apostles, His closest and dearest companions, sleeping during history's most crucial hour. What lessons can we learn from it?

This one truth we cannot miss: Times of extreme crisis require special effort and energy of us—regardless of our bodily state. The supreme requirement is for us to rise above our exhaustion and sorrow and be diligent in prayer. We cannot give in to our tired bodies; we must muster all the energy we have left to ask God to lead us out of temptation and strengthen us for the day of battle. Yes, it was probably past midnight. The day had been long, filled with the emotionally draining experience of learning about the departure of their beloved Master. Nevertheless, the Savior, who knows all things, exhorted them to watch and pray. He gave no hint that they were excused from this time of prayer because of their tiredness, sorrow, or inadequacy.

In spite of the agony that Jesus was experiencing, He extended mercy and understanding to His weary disciples. He did rebuke them, but He also made generous allowances for their infirmities. They had been careless at their post of duty, but Jesus gently told them, "The spirit is will-

ing but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41; Mark 14:38). They were sincere in their love, but they had surrendered too easily to their weariness. Jesus recognized their devotion above their failures, treating them with the same type of grace that is characteristic of our Father. Jesus expected some sympathy and encouragement from His disciples; but in the midst of His great trial, He comforted them.

Perhaps more vividly than anywhere else in the Scriptures, this passage gives our Lord's appraisal of the power of prayer to deliver us from temptation. He knew full well what lay ahead. His apostles would become embroiled in the arrests, the trials, and even in the crucifixion. It would be a day like no other; it would be easy for them to flee, to deny the Christ, and to cower in fear. What could best prepare them for this dreadful ordeal they were entering: physical rest or perseverance in prayer? Jesus left no doubt about His answer. Five times, even six times if an implication is counted, Matthew, Mark, and Luke say that Jesus asked His companions to watch and pray that they would not be led into temptation.

If these disciples had been diligent in prayer, what would have been the outcome? Would they have forsaken Jesus and fled? Would Jesus have been aided in some way unknown to us as He faced this dark hour? We cannot know what the results would have been, but we do know that Jesus believed praying was what should have been done. Hebrews 5:7 says that Jesus was heard because of His prayers, and we can assume, upon the integrity of God, that His disciples would have been heard also. If they had prayed, something would have happened that did not happen because they did not pray!

Therefore, this scene reminds us of the tragedy of squandering an opportunity that even angels yearn to have. As we look back on this event, we realize how significant the moment was. Jesus was confronting His greatest trial, the most far-reaching event of the ages. These apostles were given the opportunity to pray for the Savior as He agonized for the salvation of the world. God's providence had brought them to this garden to watch, wait, and pray with the Christ, the One who would soon be given as the sin offering for all men. Tragedy of all trag-

edies, these chosen men fell asleep! They gave in to the weakness of the flesh, leaving Jesus to suffer alone and leaving themselves unprepared to enter the circle of temptations awaiting them. Angels were standing by, ready to wipe the sweat from Jesus' brow, to strengthen Him, and to remove from the earth anyone or anything that might touch Him. The apostles were given the privilege to watch and pray for and with Him, but they succumbed to sleep and allowed this highest of all opportunities to pass away. Later, with clearer insight of how significant this moment was, how they must have regretted what they had done!

Let us remember that we, too, are made of dust and give in to the weaknesses of our bodies far too often. Instead of praying, we some-

times play; instead of watching, we often drift away into sleep. Our kind and gracious Lord sees the good in us even when we have responded terribly to His call. Let us recommit ourselves to watch and pray so that we will not enter into temptation. Let us value every moment we have with Christ, knowing that any one of them could be earth-shattering and spiritually monumental.

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The willing spirit will be made more willing by prayer. The flesh, in its weakness, can be sustained and kept from temptation only by watchfulness and prayer.