

Grief in the Gardens: Tracing the Tears from Gethsemane to Golgotha

“He began to be sorrowful and troubled” (Matthew 26:36-46)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on March 13, 2016

Introduction

- ❖ Lately we’ve been going through the book of Ephesians, but here in the month of March we wanted to take a break to do a mini-series leading up to Easter. We’re calling it *Grief in the Gardens*, and by gardens (plural) that’s a reference to the Garden of Gethsemane and the garden cemetery located below Golgotha (Jn. 19:41). **Those two gardens are the bookends of Jesus’ arrest, trial, and execution.** Beginning in Gethsemane, you can trace a theme of grief experienced and expressed in Jesus himself (Mt. 26:37), in his disciples (Mt. 26:75), in his mourners (Lk. 23:27), and in Mary Magdalene on that first Easter morning (Jn. 20:11).
 - ▶ And the interesting thing is how the Resurrection event changes everything. It speaks directly to that grief we’re all too familiar with. The Resurrection has the power to transform our grief into hope, to turn our sorrow into joy.
 - **That means if we want to truly appreciate the meaning of Easter, we need to confront the reality of grief.** Grief due to the *suffering* we experience in a broken world. As well as grief due to the *sin* we commit as broken people. We need space to grieve. We need to resist the tendency to come to church with our smiley faces on and never take time to express our grief and sorrow.
- ❖ Because we’re coming before a God who welcomes it. **Regardless of the impression you've gotten from God’s people, what we learn from today’s passage is that God himself welcomes you to come and worship even if your emotional state is not that of gratitude and joy.** Even if all you feel right now is pain, confusion, deep distress, and anguish.
 - ▶ I know a lot of us are feeling that right now. Because we’ve shown up on another Sunday still without our dear sister Yvonne, sitting in the pews with us, singing her heart out with us. She’s still in a hospital bed, in a deep coma, and at this point the prognosis is poor. We’re all praying for a miracle. For her to wake up. And each day that passes with no change in her condition, compounds our pain, our confusion, our deep distress, our anguish.
- ❖ Why is this happening? Why is God putting us through such grief? Why doesn’t he answer already? Honestly, we don’t know. **We can’t say for sure why he allows this grief. But what is sure is that he knows what it feels like.** That’s what we get out of this passage.
 - ▶ This morning we don’t come before a God who stands aloof, who can’t understand or identify with your pain and anguish. No, we come this morning to worship the man of sorrows who was well acquainted with grief (Isa. 53:3). We come to Jesus who, in Gethsemane’s garden, endured a sorrow and anguish that you and I simply cannot fathom. But ironically it was reserved for us. **As we consider what Jesus went through in that garden, keep in mind that it was meant for us.** It was done for us.
- ❖ Church, you don’t have to suck it up and hold it together. **You don’t have to mask your grief. The Lord welcomes you to bring it to him in prayer.** That’s the main point here.
 - ▶ So we’re going to cover these verses by asking three questions: 1) What did Jesus experience in the garden? 2) Why did Jesus need to go through this experience? 3) How does it impact us? What do we learn from this?

What did Jesus experience in the garden?

- ❖ So what exactly did Jesus experience in the garden of Gethsemane? What was he going through? That's our first question. Now there are three ways to answer that. The first is this: **In the garden, Jesus experienced a sudden sense of anguish at the prospect of his death.**
 - ▶ He had just brought his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, which means "oil press". It was an olive grove on the western slope of Mt. Olivet located right outside the walls of Jerusalem. It was a place he often frequented with his disciples. He asked them to sit and wait for him as he planned to spend some time in private prayer.

- ❖ Now v37 says he does take Peter, James, and John along with him and suddenly it says he "*began to be sorrowful and troubled*". **It's unfortunate but those words don't do justice to capture Jesus' emotional state.** We're talking about a deep grief, a deep distress, that suddenly overcame him. Jesus explains in v38, "*My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.*" That's not suggesting he had suicidal thoughts. **That's suggesting a sorrow so deep, so devastating, that it feels like it's going to kill him.**
 - ▶ One commentator says that word "troubled" is the word for "horror". Jesus is walking with Peter, James, and John deeper into the woods of Gethsemane, and a sudden sense of horror fell upon him. A crushing sense of sorrow and anguish pressed upon him so hard that Jesus felt like he was dying.

- ❖ In Luke's account, he includes a tidbit not mentioned here. He says that each time Jesus came back to check on his disciples, they noticed he was drenched. Drenched in sweat. He has been agonizing so much in prayer, to the point that it says, "*his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.*" (Lk. 22:44).
 - ▶ **He was covered in bloody sweat.** His internal agony was so severe that blood vessels were popping and blood was coming out of his pores. That's how bad it was.

- ❖ You might be wondering, "Why all the sudden?" **Since we know the prospect of death was not a sudden realization.** Ever since chapter 16, Jesus had been predicting his impending suffering and death at the hands of religious leaders (Mt. 16:21; 17:12, 22-23). Just before this, he told his disciples he would be betrayed (26:20), that his blood would be poured out (26:28), and that he would be struck down and they would all fall away (26:31). So the thought of dying – of even dying a brutal death – was no surprise to Jesus.

- ❖ *So what was it? What brought on this sudden sense of horror?* It was a cup. Jesus mentions it in his prayer in v39. Look there with me, "*And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me"*".
 - ▶ **A cup of blood-red wine was a well used image in the OT to symbolize the wrath of God being poured out in judgment on sin.** For example, Psalm 75 speaks of God executing judgment on the wicked, "*For in the hand of the LORD there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed, and he pours out from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs.*" (Ps. 75:8; cf. Isa 51:17)

- ❖ This is the same cup Jesus has in view, which leads to the second way to answer our question. What did Jesus experience in the garden? **In the garden, Jesus experienced an immediate and vivid sense of God's wrath.** A cup of foaming wrath that he knew he would be asked to drink – to drain it down to the dregs.
- ❖ This sheds light on what would otherwise be considered puzzling behavior. **The image of Jesus in deep distress and covered in bloody sweat is a stark contrast from the way he's portrayed in the rest of the Gospels.** Nowhere are we given the impression that Jesus has a weak stomach or shaking knees. Up to this point, he's been depicted as resolute to die. He had set his face like a flint towards Jerusalem. He knew exactly what was waiting for him.
 - ▶ So you wouldn't expect him to crack. Just like Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego before the fiery furnace, or Daniel before the lion's den, or those Christians throughout church history who were tortured and burned at the stake. **We're talking about men and women who faced death unblinkingly.** With no bloody sweat. With no pleas to God for another way. So it makes you wonder what happened to Jesus? To his resoluteness? Why is he praying for the cup to pass, for there to be another way?
- ❖ You have to understand that, for all these courageous men and women, their deaths were different. **They faced martyrdom. But Jesus faced sacrifice.** Martyrs went to their death trusting God was with them in the lion's den or on the stake. But Jesus faced death completely alone. **He was to be offered up as the sin-atonement, wrath-averting sacrifice that bears the judgment of God against all sin and human wickedness.**
 - ▶ Stretching back into eternity past, God the Son shared perfect, unbroken fellowship with the God the Father. They shared a oneness, a unity of perfect love. **But now as Golgotha loomed larger, Jesus was faced with the prospect of the Father turning his face away, forsaking the Son, and treating him as a sinner.** On the cross, all the lies, all the hatred and pride, all the greed and lust and jealousy in our hearts would be poured out on Jesus. And the Father would punish those sins by unleashing upon his Son the full measure of his wrath.
- ❖ **No one has ever faced what Jesus faced. That cup set before him was uniquely his.** He was suddenly confronted with an immediate and vivid sense of God's wrath. Listen to what **Jonathan Edwards** had to say about what Jesus experienced, "*The sorrow and distress which his soul then suffered, arose from that lively, and full, and immediate view which he had then been given of that cup of wrath. . . . The thing that Christ's mind was so full of at that time . . . was the dread his feeble human nature had of that dreadful cup, which was vastly more terrible than Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace. He had then a near view of that furnace of wrath, in which he was to be cast; he was brought to the mouth of the furnace that he might look into it, and stand and view its raging flames and see the glowing of its heat, that he might know where he was going and what he was going to suffer.*"¹

¹ Jonathan Edwards, "Sermon VI: Christ's Agony" in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 2 (Hendrickson), 867.

- ❖ Do you see what was happening to Jesus? In that garden, as the cup came in closer view, it was like he was being led to the edge of the furnace of God's fiery wrath to peer inside. He caught a glimpse of its horrors, and he recoiled. Now why should that surprise anyone?
 - ▶ This leads to our third explanation. What did Jesus experience in the garden? **In the garden, he experienced a relatable human reaction to avoid unfathomable pain.** He asked his Father to “*let this cup pass from me.*” In Luke’s account he asks his Father to remove the cup (Lk. 22:42). Please God, take it away.

- ❖ Does that make you think any less of him? Does that make him less glorious in your eyes? Were you expecting a Braveheart-type response? For Jesus to spit in the face of danger and cry out, “Freedom!” **I think we have this impression that the Son of God should face the cross without flinching, without blinking, with his chin up and a stiff upper lip.** We think that’s fitting for a Savior.

- ❖ But I'd argue the opposite. **I’d say his reaction right here is what makes Jesus the Perfect Savior of mankind. Because it demonstrates that he really is a man.** He’s really one of us. His true humanity is here on display. **And because he’s one of us, he can represent us.**
 - ▶ You see, a Superman would certainly be able to come down from the clouds, rescue us from our enemies, and eradicate evil. But a Superman can’t identify with us, so he can’t substitute his life *for us* as a sin-atonement, wrath-averting sacrifice. **Only a fellow man can save mankind from the evil that lies within us – from our true enemy, our sin.** Yes, he needs to be a perfect man, a righteous man who knows no sin, which Jesus most certainly is by virtue of his divine nature.
 - But he’s still a man. **And his reaction, staring into that foaming cup of wrath, is what you’d expect from a man.** A man who understands what it’s like to go through agony. A Savior who can sympathize with our weaknesses, who has in every respect been tempted as we are, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15).

- ❖ **Superman can pity you, but he can’t sympathize with you.** He doesn’t know what it’s like to be weak in the knees in the face of great agony, to be filled with confusion, with questions and doubts. He doesn’t know what you’re going through. But Jesus does. Jesus was there. He went through all of that in the garden.
 - ▶ That’s why he’s the Perfect Savior. He’s what you’re looking for. He’s fully God so he can fully rescue you from your sins. But he’s also fully man who fully identifies with you and understands what you’re going through. He’s the Savior you need.

Why did Jesus need this experience?

- ❖ Now this leads to our second question. We now have a better understanding of what Jesus experienced in the garden, but now the question of why. Why did Jesus need to go through this? What was God doing? What was God teaching him?
 - ▶ This is where I refer back to Jonathan Edwards to get a better sense of why. Why this Gethsemane experience? **Why is Jesus given a vivid sense, a foretaste, of the wrath and agony to come?**

- ❖ Edwards' answer goes something like this. He says there's a difference between someone being suddenly pushed into a fiery pit. Compared to letting him first peer into it, to get close and feel the heat on his face singeing his eyebrows, and then asking him to jump.
 - ▶ **In the first case you're dealing with a mere human sacrifice. But in the second, you're dealing with a Savior.** With a Savior who loves you. Who knew full well what waited in store at the bottom of that pit, but he jumped anyway.

- ❖ This is how Edwards puts it, *“Christ was going to be cast into a dreadful furnace of wrath, and it was not proper that he should plunge himself into it blindfold, as not knowing how dreadful the furnace was. Therefore that he might not do so, God first brought him and set him at the mouth of the furnace, that he might look in, and stand and view its fierce and raging flames, and might see where he was going, and might voluntarily enter into it and bear it for sinners, as knowing what it was.”*²

- ❖ It's all about his willingness. Jesus was given a taste of that cup. **He was allowed to taste how bitter it was, how painful it would be to drain it down to the dregs.** And right then and there, he had a decision to make.
 - ▶ Do I drink it? Do I jump? Do I go to the cross? Right there in the garden, something in Jesus' human nature probably felt like running. Probably felt like calling on twelve legions of angels to come to his rescue (26:53).

- ❖ **If you assume this should've been an easy decision for Jesus, I wouldn't call that a high view of the Son of Man. I'd call that a low view of hell.** Because that's what he was staring at. Perhaps your view of God's wrath is too harmless, too benign. If we truly understood how wicked our sin is and how horrible is the punishment it deserves, then we'd understand why even the Son of Man would have second thoughts.

- ❖ **This was the very temptation the devil kept dangling before Jesus – the temptation to avoid that cross, to avoid drinking that cup.** Think about those forty days in the wilderness where the devil offered Jesus a kingdom and a crown with no need to bear a cross (Mt. 4:1-11). Or think about Satan inciting Peter in an attempt to deter Jesus from the path of the cross (Mt. 16:22-23).
 - ▶ This moment in the garden was no different. I think the devil thought he finally had him. **After all, this wasn't the first time the devil succeeded in tempting God's chosen man in the setting of a garden.** In Eden, the First Adam was successfully tempted to put his will first. He told God, "My will and not yours be done". That led to death. To the garden turning into a wasteland.
 - But in this second Garden, things played out differently. This time the Second Adam successfully resisted temptation, chose obedience, and prayed, "Not my will but yours be done". His act of obedience led to life.

² Ibid., 868.

- ❖ **And what makes his decision all the more amazing is when you consider who he's jumping into the furnace for.** Think back to how the disciples are described. They're falling asleep on him left and right. At his darkest hour, when he needed them more than ever, as he's about to face his greatest test, his greatest temptation, he asks his friends to keep watch. To stay up with me. Pray with me. Pray for me.
 - ▶ But three times he walks back to check on them and they're fast asleep. And don't be hard on them since those disciples represent us all. **How many times have we literally fallen asleep on God in prayer or in our devotions?** And how many times have we let him down and found ourselves in a spiritual stupor?
 - It's as if the Father was saying to the Son, "That's the human race for you. That's who you're drinking the bitter cup for. They disappoint you. They fail you. They fall asleep on you, but I want you to die *for them*. I want you to jump into that furnace and suffer the full force of my wrath *for them*."
- ❖ Do you see why this Gethsemane experience is so important? Jesus knew exactly what he was signing up for. He was given a preview, a foretaste. He wasn't just pushed into that furnace all the sudden. No, he saw it, considered it, feared it, and yet willingly jumped in.
 - ▶ **And it's that brief hesitation – that prayer asking if there's another way – that shows just how wicked our sin is that it would deserve a punishment so horrifying that even the Son of God would recoil at it.**
 - And at the same time, it proves the extent of his love for us. He got his answer from the Father. There was no other way. There was no way to reconcile sinners to God without the cross. And so he got off his knees, woke his disciples up, and prepared himself to be arrested.

How does it impact us?

- ❖ So we've seen what Jesus experienced, why he had to experience it, and now the final question: How does it impact us? What can we draw from this garden experience? There are two things we could say.
 - ❖ **First, it impacts the way we handle our grief over suffering.** All of us who know and care about Yvonne are grieving for her, for her husband Chris, for their newborn son Jonah. Sometimes we're at a loss. When we face a tragedy, when a loved one gets really sick or dies, when we're faced with deep disappointment, we don't know how we should feel. We know God is good and does all things well, but our grief is real and often overwhelming.
 - ❖ What we learn from Jesus is not to mask it or ignore it – but to bring our grief to God in prayer. **And we can be sure that God hears us because we're told directly in Scripture that God heard his Son's prayer – even as it was filled with grief and confusion.**
 - ▶ Let me read to you out of **Hebrews 5:7**, "*In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.*"

- ❖ Let that sink in. He was heard. **God didn't answer in the affirmative. He didn't let the cup pass. But he heard.** What we learn from this experience is that you can be in the closest of relationship with God, you can be holy and blameless, you can pray with the greatest of faith – **and God will certainly hear you but you still may not get what you want.**
 - ▶ All of our prayers should be modeled after this one. Where we pray with complete honesty, with complete earnestness, with complete faith, but in no way are we trying to turn the hand of God. That would be called magic.
 - **Prayer is not magic. It's not about manipulating God's will. Prayer is about bending your will towards God's.** Go ahead and express the desires of your heart, but it's ultimately about surrendering yourself to the holy will of God. The words "Let your will be done" should permeate every prayer.

- ❖ Church, let's keep praying for a miracle to take place in Yvonne's life. Let's not limit our prayers and what we ask of God to accomplish. Let's pray for a full recovery. **But do not fall for the lie that says any other result means God must not be listening – or worse, that he's not really there.**
 - ▶ If there's anything to be learned from Gethsemane it's this: **God hears your grief. God understands your grief. And God knows exactly what he's doing with it.** God doesn't make mistakes. He does all things well.

- ❖ Now I realize that some of you don't know Yvonne. And you're not going through any suffering and neither are those close to you. So you're not grieving over suffering per se, but you are grieving over your own sin. **This garden experience also impacts the way we handle our grief over sin.**
 - ▶ When we fall into sin, we fall into a pit of despair. We can be so hard on ourselves because we know better than anyone else how wicked our thoughts are and how selfish our intentions can be. **We keep falling back into the same sinful patterns. So it feels like God could never take me back.** He wouldn't forgive me again, would he? It's been like the umpteenth time. Enough must be enough by now.

- ❖ But that's when we need to return to this story, to this long night in Gethsemane. God the Father essentially placed the bitter cup in front of his Son. And he said, "Look at this cup you're going to drink. Do you see the pain, the agony, the horror of what you'll endure? I'm sorry but this is the only way. It's either you or them. **Either they drink this cup and die, or you drink it for them. Either they perish or you perish.** Which will it be?"
 - ▶ Jesus could've said, "Forget them. They keep falling back into sin over and over again. They keep falling asleep on me. Why should I go through such great agony for those who are constantly failing me?" He could've said that. But he didn't. He said, "Your will be done." He loved his own and he loved them to the end.
 - **Friends, if you're still holding on to grief over your sins, if you still feel unworthy and unloved by God, then you need to meet Jesus in this garden.** You need to see him drenched in bloody sweat, to hear his loud cries and tears, and to believe he's doing it for you.