

**24 Hours That Changed the World:
The Garden of Gethsemane
Psalm 118:5-6, 17, 13-14 and Mark 14:26-50
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Sometime after 11:00 on Thursday night, Jesus and his disciples concluded their Passover Seder by singing a hymn. We know the words they sang because this hymn, like the prayer Jesus spoke as he blessed the bread, is still a part of the Seder. It is called the Hallel, a word that means, “praise” and is the root of our word “hallelujah.” The Hallel is composed of selected verses from Psalms 113 through 118, some of which Sharon read a few minutes ago.

After leaving the upper room, Jesus led his disciples east and then north on the road that ran along the Kidron Valley. On their right were the tombs of priests, prophets and ordinary people who were buried there, facing Jerusalem. The Kidron Valley is also called the Valley of Jehoshaphat and the prophet Joel (3:12) identifies it as the site of the Last Judgment: “Let the nations rouse themselves, and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge.”

Yet on this night, the one who will someday judge the nations, walked this dark road to face his own judgment. I can’t help but imagine that this irony was not lost on Jesus.

At the last supper Jesus had predicted that one of the disciples would betray him. Now, as he walked with this friends, Jesus predicted that all of them would desert him. This prediction captures one part of the grief Jesus experienced that night. He knew Judas had already sold him out for thirty pieces of silver and would soon betray him with a kiss. He knew that Peter, despite his protests to the contrary, would deny even knowing him. He knew the rest of his followers would desert him, fleeing to protect their own lives. The experience of being betrayed, denied, and deserted by his closest friends—this would produce great sorrow in any of us, but imagine what it must have felt like for Jesus who had been with these men every day for three years, pouring his life into them, teaching them and training them to carry on his mission. It speaks volumes that the Gospel writers included this information rather than glossing over what was certainly an embarrassing testimony about the disciples. The very fact that they failed Jesus in his greatest hour of need helps us trust that there is grace for us when we deny, desert and betray him.

And, there is one more important piece of this story we don't want to miss. Following his prediction that his friends would all fail him and fall away, Jesus looked beyond their betrayal and also predicted their restoration. "After I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee," Jesus told them. He was already promising to forgive them and take them back, and what Jesus did for his disciples then, he will also do for us today.

At the base of the Mount of Olives, overlooking the Kidron Valley, sits a grove of olive trees called the Garden of Gethsemane. The garden looks directly onto the east wall of the Temple Gate. John is the only Gospel that identifies Gethsemane as a "garden." He is also the only one who tells us that the tomb where Jesus was buried was in a garden and that when Mary Magdalene first saw the risen Christ, she thought he was a gardener. Perhaps John wants us to make the connection between what Jesus was doing and the events that took place in another garden, at the very beginning of the Bible. God was the gardener who planted the garden called Eden. And it was in that garden that Adam and Eve disobeyed God and Paradise was lost. Jesus, unlike Adam, will be faithful to God and in so doing he will reverse the effects of Adam and Eve's "fall." Paul will come to speak of Jesus as the "last Adam." (1 Corin.15:45)

John tells us that Judas knew where to find Jesus on this particular night because "Jesus often met there with his disciples." (John 18:2) Luke adds that Jesus went to the Mount of Olives to pray that night, "as was his custom." (22:39) We might ask why Jesus would so often go to this place? Was it the beauty of the grove? Was it the fact that from this vantage point he could see the Temple Mount? Was it because David had gone to the Mount of Olives weeping after he was betrayed by his son? Was it perhaps a way of connecting to Zechariah's prophecy that the Messiah's feet would one day stand on the Mount of Olives? (14:4) Or, was this simply a peaceful and serene place where he felt God's presence in a special way? Maybe it was a bit of all of these. We can't know for sure, of course, but we do know that Jesus had regularly come here to pray and it was to this place that he returned when he was in his greatest anguish.

As they entered Gethsemane, Jesus asked his disciples to watch and pray. Then he took Peter, James and John with him a little deeper into the garden. He did not speak of or display his anguish until he was alone with his three closest companions. We all need close friends with whom we can share moments when we are afraid, angry or grieving. To their credit, this seems to be one time when Peter and the others held their tongues. Jesus did not ask them for any advice or even for words of encouragement, and they did not offer any. When we are in

moments of deepest anguish, we don't need our companions to say something as much as we simply need to know that they are there for us. That seems to have been true even for the Son of God.

Jesus separated himself from these three and then gave himself over to his grief, throwing himself on the ground to pray. After a time, he returned to Peter, James and John and was acutely disappointed to find them asleep. "Could you not stay awake with me one hour?" It was in this context that Jesus spoke those famous words that serve perhaps not so much as a warning, but as a note of grace to his friends: "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Here again is an invitation to identify with the disciples. This part of the story is powerful precisely because we can imagine ourselves late at night, full after a big meal, falling asleep when Jesus needs us to be awake and in prayer. Besides offering us grace, this small detail increases the sense that Jesus will drink from the cup of suffering alone.

There are many views of why Jesus was in such anguish in the garden. One possibility is that Jesus may have been wrestling once more with temptation. After all, one word from him, and he could have been spared the agony of the cross. The temptation to avoid suffering would have been great. One wonders if it is a coincidence that Jesus prayed three times for the cup of suffering to pass from him or if perhaps it was meant to remind us of the three temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness. In any event, Jesus again passes the test. "Not what I want, but your will be done," he prays to the Father.

Another aspect of Jesus' anguish might be his knowledge of Jerusalem's fate if the conflict with the Jewish leaders came to a head this way. If Jesus died, most people would not recognize him as the Messiah. They would continue to search for someone else. They would not understand that God wanted them to love their enemies, and instead they would wait for a messiah who would lead them to attempt a military overthrow of the Romans.

They didn't have to wait long. Thirty years after Jesus' death, such a leader rose to prominence and led the Jews to instigate military action against Rome. Rome's reaction was predictably swift and furious. They crushed the Jewish resistance, killing over a million Jews and their supporters. Jerusalem was laid waste and the Temple was destroyed. The Gospel of Luke points out Jesus' grief over the fate of Jerusalem. When he approached the city on Palm Sunday, Jesus had wept over the city:

“If you, even you had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.” (Luke 19:41-44)

Here in the garden, we might well wonder if Jesus was in anguish not just for his own impending suffering but also the suffering that was coming to his people.

And, finally, we should not miss the obvious fact that in Jesus, God had become fully human. What would you be feeling if you knew that within a matter of hours, you would be tortured; publicly humiliated; stripped naked; and subjected to one of the cruelest, most inhumane and physically excruciating forms of capital punishment ever devised?

All of which makes Jesus’ prayer of surrender to the Father even more compelling. Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane captures the essence of complete trust. It was bold enough to lay before God his desires—“o let this cup pass, if there is any other way”—but humble and obedient enough to reaffirm that he would do whatever God asked him to do, no matter the cost. What about us? Are we willing to pray that same prayer of surrender? I have to confess that when I look at what Jesus did in the garden and I think about the things that I have such a hard time letting go of, I am ashamed, convicted, and also inspired to become a follower that loves God with complete abandon.

The night has worn on, with Jesus praying and the disciples sleeping. Sometime after midnight, Judas arrives in the garden, leading a group of men. The imagery is so powerful that even now, 2000 years later, the name “Judas” continues to be synonymous with “traitor.” A lot has been written on the possible motives Judas might have had to betray Jesus—whether he thought the events of this night would finally force Jesus to action to raise the army and lead the revolution Judas expected, or whether he was disillusioned with Jesus or whether it was pure greed. Whatever his motive, Judas was filled with remorse following Jesus’ arrest and trial and he took his own life after the crucifixion.

Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss. The Greek word for “kiss” that is used here is *philein*, a word that describes true affection for another. Judas loved Jesus, but he was willing to betray him. He loved him, but he resented him. He loved

him, but he was frustrated by him. He loved him, but he sold his friend for 30 pieces of silver. We have relationships that are complicated like that, don't we? Perhaps even Judas was in conflict and agony over his actions that night.

As the arrest unfolded, Peter drew a sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. Just hours from his own torture and crucifixion, Jesus pauses to heal a man who had been sent to arrest him. He then commanded the disciples to put away their weapons.

As Jesus was shackled and arrested, the disciples took flight. Jesus stood watching as all his friends deserted him. Only Judas remained. Jesus had been betrayed with a kiss, then abandoned by his followers. And, his suffering was only beginning.