

Part 47: Human Hope

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March 10, 2019

I was speaking with some of the missionaries we support in Italy earlier this week and they asked for prayer for a man named Vincent [not his real name]. Vincent is a Brazilian born physicist who is now working in Italy. While his wife is a believer, Vincent, and the scientific community he lives in, is staunchly atheistic.

But through the work of the church over there, and the prayers of his wife, Vincent has been increasingly attending Bible studies and meeting with the pastors over there. In one of those recent conversations he told the pastor that, "At one point I knew Jesus as only a man, but now I know he is also God." I would ask that you would continue to pray for Vincent, that he would not only acknowledge Jesus as God, but that he would see all that Jesus has done to save him from his sins by grace, through faith.

But Vincent's path is often the normal experience of conversion for those who are raised outside of the Christian influence. They understand that Jesus lived as a historical figure, but they don't understand that this man was also fully God. I would imagine that for those who were raised from a Christian background, you might have the opposite trouble. It is easy to see Jesus as a God, for that's what saviors are, but to see him as a human is a lesser treasured truth.

The dangers of each of these poles are these: to neglect Jesus' divinity is to rob him not only of his Lordship, but also his authority. And to neglect Jesus' humanity is to rob him not only of his substitutionary role, but of his empathy towards us.

To not see Jesus as God is to not see him worthy of praise, and to not see Jesus as human is to not see him as near in our daily experiences. And isn't that what most of us are after? An object of hope which simultaneously says in experience, "I understand," and in authority, "It's going to be ok."

In the gospel of Matthew we have seen Jesus constantly referring to himself as "the Son of Man," this was his way not only of identifying himself with humanity, but in taking up a prophecy in Daniel which identifies himself with divinity. But in our text today we come into full contact with the humanity of Jesus Christ in a way which is so staggeringly powerful and beautiful.

So today I want us to not only see the humanity of Jesus but the present hope for humanity which is the application of this doctrine. Throughout this text we are going to be examining primarily the experience of Jesus. Matthew describes the experience of other people in this text, but the consistent heart beat is the emotions our Lord had in the final hours of his freedom.

What we are going to look at today are three experiences of Jesus and their implications in our text and in our own lives. Those three experiences are: **The agony of atonement, the need for prayer, and lastly the resolve of the Messiah.**

Let's read the first portion of our text today and what I want you to listen for are the glimpses Matthew is giving us into the heart and experience of Jesus. The word I'm going to use here is agony, and this is

our first point today: **The agony of atonement.** But as you listen to the state of our savior I want you to think of the kind of words you would ascribe to Jesus here.

Let's read **Matthew 26:36-46.**

I want you to think of the last time you were sorrowful or troubled. When was the last time you understood the weight of what was about to come or a sadness unshakable?

For us, we probably don't have to look too far back in to find such a moment. That's because we live in a world where brokenness is the norm. We are acclimated to it. I heard this week that in Russian Siberia, temperatures get so cold that newborns are often intentionally exposed to the cold after birth so that they can begin to be acclimated to such elements.

To live there you must quickly learn to make your home in a world of bitter cold. And we too have been exposed to such a world at birth. It doesn't matter if you are born in Siberia or the Sahara, we are exposed to the sinfulness of this world early and often and it shapes our expectations. It doesn't mean that we never feel the bite of the cold, but it does mean we have grown to live with our own insulation of brokenness.

But imagine now the experience of Jesus. Jesus as the eternal son of God existed in eternity past in a perfect world. He only knew the joy of relational warmth with God the Father and God the Spirit. He only knew a world where he was accepted and seen as the radiant divinity that he was. Not in a spoiled sense of a pretentious child, but in a realistic sense of his divine status.

There was no one to wound him, no one to abandon him, nothing that would disrupt the joy he shared with his heavenly Father, no physical pain for him to endure, no sin to actively resist. But then he came to earth. He was, incarnate, in the flesh. And he felt the bite of the cold.

And here we have a 30 year old God-man, who despite all of the stubbed toes, active temptations, and ardent opposition here in this text Matthew says: "he became sorrowful and troubled." Can you imagine the experience this must have been for our savior? The one who upholds the earth, falling onto it in sorrow. The very word of God faltering for words in the pain of his soul.

Imagine how Peter, James and John felt as their master, their teacher, the one who walked on water, who calmed a storm, who raised a dead man back to life looked at them in the glow of the full moon, and said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed, even to the point of death."

Can you imagine? No, we cannot. This side of death we will never know what Jesus gave up to come and be our savior, but in this text we can see the weight of that sacrifice in full effect.

The question we must ask is why is Jesus so troubled? Why does it start here and now? Is it because he is finally going to be arrested? Is it because he knows within an hour all of his closest disciples are going to leave him? Is it because he knows he is going to be put up to a mock trial with false witnesses brought against him? Does he know he is going to be murdered in a way designed to be most excruciating?

If it were us, we might be able to understand the weight Jesus felt. That is a lot coming all at once. But we've seen Christians throughout the ages, including some of these very men surrounding Jesus in this scene, face martyrdom in peace and even somber celebration.

The early church father Tertullian describes the martyrdom of a young mother named Perpetua. As she was lead into the arena where she was stripped naked and brutally murdered for her faith, it was recorded that she sang hymns. When called forward at her time of death Tertullian notes: "She bound up her disheveled hair...lest she should appear to be mourning in her glory."

What poignant posture in the face of man's wickedness. But here we do not see a put together Jesus, we see him grieved, bent, and crushed. And yet in all of this he did not sin. But why the contrast between Jesus and other witnesses of church history?

Because Jesus was not going to die as a martyr. Jesus was going to die as a substitute.

Look specifically at the content of Jesus' prayers to his father: **Matthew 26:39,42,44**.

Jesus' prayer is that God would remove this cup from him. That if there were a way to have a cup pass apart from him, that I would be done. But what is that cup? For the Jews reading Matthew's gospel, this would have been clear because they knew the symbolism of the Old Testament so well. But for us we must remind ourselves of the metaphor Jesus is using. The cup was a symbol of God's wrath which was to be poured out on God's unfaithful people.

Look with me at **Isaiah 51:17-20**. This cup was the cup of God's perfect judgement against sin. It was a cup that through the days of history increased every day as sin abounded among God's people. It was a cup that if left untouched, would continue to overflow till one day it consumed those who sat under it. For the cup to be disarmed, it must be poured out.

And Jesus knew that the worst sorrow that awaited him was not physical suffering, nor the embarrassment of the cross, nor the emotional trauma of being abandoned by his followers in the moment of greatest need. The greatest sorrow which awaited him was the receipt of the sins of the whole world, and the punishment those sins deserved.

The Jesus who knew no sin, who committed no sin, was going to become sin. And the Jesus who knew only intimacy with his Father was going to face the rejection of the Father. The sorrow you would have felt at judgment day, Jesus experienced the weight of it for you in the garden this night. What words would you use to describe this experience? Now think of this. If those words, if that experience seems to be so dense. Know that this experience is only the anticipation of judgment, not judgment itself. The weight of judgement which will come is far worse than the anticipation that precedes it. But this is why Jesus is so important, he is leading us to him so that we might avoid both the anticipation and the punishment itself.

If you see the weight which our Lord bore for your sins, you see not only a God who substitutes himself for us, but you see a God who understands your own sorrow. For no one has been grieved like Jesus in this moment was grieved. Every person will at some point feel the weight of their own sins, Jesus here felt the weight of the sins of the world.

Because Jesus was going to move forward even amidst such spiritual agony, there is infinite and concrete hope for you in your own agony. To you who feels the weight of your sin, so did Jesus, and he is going to die so that he might bear that burden for you. To you who feel that everything around you is going terribly wrong, so did Jesus, but he trusted himself to his Father who promised to work all things

for his good. To you who feel sorrowful and troubled, so was Jesus. And that same Jesus is alive today and calling him to you that you might find relief.

The beautiful tension of this text is that from the shadow of this agony, we are going to see Jesus move towards the cross in a sort of peaceful resolution. How was the savior himself encouraged in his weakness? Prayer.

This is our second point today: **The Need for Prayer.**

I remember when I was in seminary, I had one class which was basically a small group of guys and a professor who would mentor the small group. We had at one point to discuss an area we would like to grow in as believers and we were tasked to make a plan for how we wanted to grow.

Almost to the person each of the students, myself included said we would like to pray more. To which this wise old professor said, "The best way to pray more is to just pray more." And as condescending as it might have been for these aspiring theologians, he was right.

I imagine that most of us in here do not desire to pray less. So the reason we don't pray more is not a matter of lack of desire, but instead lack of something else. It is as Jesus says to the disciples in this text: "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

That really is the distinction in this text isn't it. Let's read it again and let's note not only the attributes of Jesus' prayer, but the dedication of Jesus to prayer in contrast to that of the disciples: **Matthew 26:38-46.**

Don't you think that if there were anyone in this text, who at this very hour would be least inclined to pray it would be Jesus? He is the son of God. He has been the one predicting this moment. And yet it is Jesus who is most committed to prayer and the disciples who wrestle most with the failings of their flesh.

But from emotional turmoil to the ordinary burden of sleep, Jesus makes it clear that prayer is an ever present help for those who love Jesus. In all of the weight of Jesus' sorrow we saw above, it was his prayer that kept him from sinning, and it was his prayer that empowered him to move forward with the cross.

In verse 41, Jesus tells the disciples the best way to avoid temptation is to pray. Jesus already taught the disciples to pray like this in chapter 6 when he told them to pray saying, "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil."

If you wish to be a believer whose sorrow is turned into strength, who avoids the temptation of sin, and who draws near to God as a habit, you ought to be one who prays as Jesus does in this text.

There are three interesting points to note about Jesus' prayer life here that should influence our own moments of sorrow and trial. These are that Jesus prayed three times the same prayer to his father, Jesus prayed all three times according to God's will, and all three times there was no clear answer by God given in this text.

Yet by the end of Jesus' prayer we see a totally different Jesus leaving the garden than we did the Jesus who came into the garden.

In seeing these three attributes of Jesus prayer we see the persistence of prayer, the posture of prayer and the power of prayer.

Jesus persistently prayed the exact same prayer three times to his father. And he did it without sinning! I'm a father. And I know how frustrating it can be for a child to come up and ask me for something twice, let alone three times.

This certainly teaches us something about Jesus, but doesn't this teach us even more about God the Father? How gracious, how kind is this Father who is not put off by our weaknesses and need for him.

Do you realize that God finds it ok for us to wrestle with him? In the book of Genesis, Jacob wrestles with God and receives a reward. In the Psalms we hear David and Solomon verbally grapple with the God of the universe. And here in this text Jesus goes three times, pressing into his Father for an experience which satisfies his request. In the dark night of your sorrow, in the confusion of what God is doing in your life, are you too quick to have prayed once?

Do you think that maybe in the singleness of your prayer you are not actually modeling a respect for God, but an insufficient view of his love for you? God wants us to be able to approach him in prayer with the full weight of our human experience. Be persistent in your prayers, for in your persistence you will see the love your Father has for you.

But this is where the posture of prayer matters. In all Jesus' prayer the ultimate goal was the will of God. "Let this cup pass if it be your will." It was safe for Jesus to wrestle with and repeatedly go to God for clarity because at the end of the day Jesus wanted to do what the Father had for him to do.

In all of our persistence in prayer, we must not forget that the same loving father we are approaching is also the God of universe. And Jesus here realizes that ultimately he will experience no relief if at the end of the day God's will is not treasured.

This is an important observation. Jesus' prayer was for his own experience in the emotional drama of his soul, but the end of his prayer was God's glory. Perhaps the reason so many of us are dissatisfied in our prayer life is because the center of our prayer is our limited selves and not our all-powerful God.

It is common now to turn on the news and hear of a CEO or high ranking business leader who has embezzled funds from the company for his own gain. We generally don't like these people because they have capitalized on the great power of the company and have robbed both the company and the customers.

But think of this for a moment. How many of us, if all our prayers were answered, would find ourselves sitting on an embarrassing amount of cash while God is neglected and others are left poor?

But to pray as Jesus prayed is to go out of deep personal needs, but to at its heart seek to live for the glory of God. These kind of prayers could sound like this: "God this is hard, this is difficult, and I would like it to stop. But Lord if it is your will that I go through this, help me to suffer well." This may seem uncomfortable, but it is actually this posture that brought Jesus comfort.

Lastly Jesus shows us the power of prayer. Here Jesus is at the weakest he has been so far in this book. And here he goes to God in pleading and powerful prayer, even according to the will of his father. He goes without sin and full of faith. And we are recorded no answer.

Now if you remember back when Jesus was baptized we read this: **Matthew 3:16-17**. We would assume that in heaven, Jesus spoke with the other members of the Trinity. In Matthew 3, the Father verbally spoke to Jesus. But in Matthew 26, there is no verbal affirmation. And it would be safe to assume that it was because Jesus received no answer that he went back a second and a third time.

And yet, Jesus was transformed by his prayers. This is because prayer more than anything else is communion with God. It is bowing our experiences and our wills to our heavenly father and moving towards him expecting that he will move towards us. To summarize the theologian P.T. Forsyth, far too many people believe in the power of prayer, and far too few believe in the power of God.

But it is God himself who is the power of prayer. We do not pray only to get an answer, we pray to receive the gift of God himself. To humble our hearts and to realize that it is only through the work of Jesus that we get to call him Father.

We don't get to know what happened in the heart of Jesus when he prayed. But by the time he finished his prayers, he was renewed with a desire to pursue the cross. And we see this in our last point: **The resolve of the Messiah**.

Read with me the scene of Jesus' arrest: **Matthew 26:47-56**.

Did you see the change Jesus experienced? In his agony Jesus prayed three times for the cup to pass. In his arrest Jesus three times affirmed his commitment to fulfill scriptures.

He doesn't shy away from Judas, but calls him friend and frees him to do his dirty deed. He tells Peter, the sword swinging disciple, to put his sword back. For God would send something better than twelve disciples if it were his plan to save Jesus from this.

And he remind the crowds that the reason he was taken now, and taken like this, is because it would fulfill the scriptures. Specifically Isaiah 53:12 which says Jesus would be numbered among the transgressors.

What changed? Three pleas for relief, an audible silence, and three affirmations of Jesus' commitment to the cross. The author of Hebrews tells us of Jesus' attitude at this point: **Hebrews 12:2**.

Why was Jesus joyful? How is it that in the trials of your life, when you are wrought with sorrow, you might go to God and receive the joy even if the circumstances do not change? Jesus was not joyful because he was a fanatic. He wasn't committed to his own death because he was crazed like a suicide bomber. But Jesus also wasn't a stoic. He wasn't committed to the cross because he was without emotion.

Fanaticism and stoicism are no help for us when our souls are tried.

Jesus found rest and joy only when he was reminded of the certainty of God's will for him. That in pursuing the cross he was doing what God had long desired him to do. Look with me at the prophecy made of God's messiah in **Isaiah 53:10-11**.

In the face of sorrow incomparable, Jesus wanted to rest in God's will. He knew the world to be a place of sorrow, and the will of God to be a place of refuge even if it were to cost him everything. Jesus pursued your salvation and atonement with joy because he knew that it was only in obeying his Father that he would find his comfort and purpose.

I can promise you that life in this world will leave you on the ground in Gethsemane. And the hope for you is that you might know God's will for your life and rest in that. That even though the external circumstances might not change, the internal reality of your soul will find rest in God.

So what is that purpose? One pastor spoke of his conversations with the dying and commented that every death bed is full of a desire for purpose, but it's only the story of the gospel which holds out the promise of a happy ending.

The purpose which brought Jesus peace was becoming the substitute savior we needed. The purpose which brings you peace is seeing Jesus as that savior and giving your whole life to him. God's will for you is that you will see the beauty of his son sent to die for your sins. That you and the weakness of your flesh would be saved by the willing spirit of Jesus who died for you.

Do you have that security? It was in Jesus' divinity that security was made possible, and it was in Jesus' humanity that the security was made accessible. We can feel that today. We can know that in the agony of our hearts we can approach God and find resolution as we seek to live for his glory and love those around us because Jesus has done all of that for us.