

## **“THE BATTLE OF PRAYER”** **(Matthew 26:36-46)**

If you will to turn in your Bibles to Matthew 26, this morning I want to talk to you about the battle of prayer. When I was in college, I went on a three-month study tour of Europe – an amazing trip – and the leader of this trip was a professor from our college named Roger Congdon. Dr. Congdon at one time was recognized as having one of the top 20 or so IQs in the world – he was the proto-typical eccentric professor – and a walking encyclopedia of knowledge. Whenever we toured an historical site he would lecture as he walked, and to hear what he said you had to keep up with him. Even if no one was around him, he would continue to walk and lecture.

One evening just outside of Paris he was giving us a lecture on the sites we would visit the next day, and without realizing it I dozed off and fell asleep. The next day as we were visiting some historical site, I began asking Dr. Congdon questions about it because it was all new to me. He said – and I’ll never forget – “If you would have been paying attention last night you would have received the necessary information.” And then he just walked away. Ouch. I never feel asleep on him again.

A command we hear over and over in the New Testament is the command to be spiritual awake, alert and sober, vigilant and watchful – because every day we are in a real live spiritual battle with an unseen enemy that wants to take you out and destroy you. His strategy is very simple – he does everything possible to keep you from believing in Christ, and if you do, his strategy then shifts to doing everything possible to keep you spiritually weak and ineffective in your Christian life. He throws everything He has at you – fear, discouragement, anxiety, doubt, sorrow – anything to mess your life up.

If we’re spiritually asleep and not engaged in battle, we’ll be overpowered and defeated. I remember talking to a missionary from Africa that was home on furlough. He told me about a men’s group he had gone to shortly after arriving back in America, and I asked him how it was. He paused as though he was trying to think of something nice to say, and then he said, “It was fine – a nice group of guys and pleasant conversation, but I didn’t sense much of a battle mentality.” I said, “What do you mean by a battle mentality?” Being in Africa, he said, caused him to notice how American Christians tend to be somewhat lackadaisical about things that African Christians take more seriously like prayer and spiritual warfare. Americans don’t seem to be aware that a spiritual battle is even taking place. I think he’s right.

The best weapon in this unseen, spiritual battle is prayer. Ephesians 6:18 says, “Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere” (NLT). Prayer is perhaps the most difficult discipline of the spiritual life because it’s at war with our fleshly desires. It’s much easier to sleep than to pray. It’s much easier to worry than to pray. It’s much easier to rely on my human strength than to struggle in prayer. Lack of prayer, however, leaves us weak and vulnerable. It’s only by remaining spiritual awake and alert in prayer that we are able to rise up in strength and power to win the spiritual battle.

There’s no better passage in the Bible that explains this than Jesus’ prayer in the garden of Gethsemane the night before His crucifixion. On this night all the forces of darkness and evil come against Jesus, and you can be assured that anything you’re going through today, you have a Savior who is able to sympathize with you because He’s been there Himself. I want to read the entire passage – Matthew 26:36-46 – and then learn some key principles about engaging and winning the spiritual battles we face...

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.” When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

In these verses, as an intense spiritual battle rages, we see a contrast between the full engagement of Jesus in the battle, and the total lack of engagement by the disciples who fall asleep. Using the positive example of Jesus, we learn seven important things about how to pray and win the spiritual battles we face. The first thing we notice is that **Jesus is spiritually alert to the battle he faces**. He’s just hours away from going to the cross, and He knows that Satan is coming at Him with full force. Satan is not mentioned in this passage, but he’s clearly present. He came at Jesus before Jesus began His ministry – tempting Jesus in the wilderness to abandon His mission of going to the cross by offering Him immediate glory without any pain or suffering. Now three years later Satan marshals all his forces in one final attempt to prevent Jesus from the cross. Jesus is fully aware and alert – He knows the salvation of mankind hangs in the balance.

Jesus knows that He’s in for a fight, and the only way to get through the coming hours is to pray. He goes to a familiar place – the garden of Gethsemane. The garden of Gethsemane was located in the Kidron valley on the lower slope of the Mount of Olives. Today a church is built on the traditional site of the garden, but nearby there is a grove of olive trees that would be similar to what the garden looked like in Jesus’ day. The name Gethsemane means “olive press,” and was a place where oil was squeezed from olives. It’s an apt picture of how Jesus would be pressed to the very limits of His human will. Jesus knows this, and He’s come ready for battle.

The second thing we notice is that **Jesus brings some friends with Him into the battle**. He leaves eight disciples at the entrance of the garden, and takes with Him three disciples – Peter, James, and John. This isn’t the first time these three are singled out by Jesus. They are the leaders of the group and will play prominent roles in the early church. Just minutes earlier they each pledged their loyalty to Jesus... “We’ll be with you to the end.” What better guys to have with you in the battle.

Jesus tells the three disciples to keep watch and pray with Him. Keep watch is a military term, it’s a battle term. It shows up in 1 Peter 5 where Peter says, “Keep watch, for your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour.” It’s a fighting term. Jesus is asking His friends to seek God on His behalf – to pray for encouragement and strength as Jesus faces the full onslaught of Satan.

When you're going through a difficult time, having someone else to walk with you – to share the burden – makes the load a little lighter. There is strength in numbers. Ecclesiastes says, "Two are better than one, pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up. Though two may be overpowered, two can defend themselves." This is why we have a prayer chain to pray for each other, and why we have small groups to support one another. This is why God calls us to not forsake the gathering of ourselves together. We need our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ to be with us in the battle.

The third thing we notice is that **Jesus experiences everything we do, and more**. In verse 38 He tells Peter, James and John, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." As the hour of His death ticks closer, Jesus feels the full impact of all that is about to happen to Him, and it hit with a tidal wave of anxiety and stress and darkness. He's overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death – He feels like He's going to die. Do you know how that feels? When you find out a loved one has died suddenly? When you or a loved one gets a diagnosis of cancer? When your spouse tells you they're leaving? You can't breathe. You try to think about the future and it's dark. You don't know how you'll get through it. That's how Jesus feels.

We must remember that while Jesus is fully divine, in His incarnation He is also fully human. The fact that He experiences such overwhelming anguish tells us that you and I have a Savior who understands what we go through. He's been in the battle. Hebrews 4:15 says, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin." Jesus experienced every dimension of the human condition – He experienced temptation, He experienced loneliness, He experienced rejection, He experienced discouragement, He experienced pain, He experienced loss. When you pray and pour your heart out to the Lord, you can be assured that you're talking to someone who understands, who sympathizes, who relates, and can bear my burden with you.

And yet Jesus' anguish goes beyond what any of us have experienced. Luke tells us that Jesus' anguish is so severe that His "sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." There is a rare medical condition called hematidrosis, where the tiny blood vessels around sweat glands can rupture under extreme stress and blood can actually come out through the pores of the skin. Whatever is happening within Jesus, it is intense and it is extreme. What is He thinking about? What is causing Him such extreme anguish?

For one thing, He knows the *physical agony* He is about to endure... the flogging, the beating, and the slow, agonizing process of crucifixion. He knows about the nails that will be driven through His hands and feet. He knows that. He also knows the *emotional agony* he will face of undergoing several trials and being falsely accused and slandered; of watching His disciples flee from him, and facing His enemies alone. As the old hymn says, "Jesus walked this lonesome valley; He had to walk it by Himself; There's no one else could walk it for Him; He had to walk it by Himself."

But more than anything, Jesus knew the *spiritual agony* He would experience in being alienated from His Father. Jesus had never known a time when He was not the Father's delight. He had never known a time of unbroken fellowship with the Father. But on the cross, for the first time in all eternity, He would be abandoned by the Father. Being abandoned and forsaken was nothing new to Jesus. His own family spurned Him – His hometown turned against Him – His nation rejected Him – soon His own disciples would abandon Him. But He always had His Father.

But on the cross Jesus will cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Why would the Father turn His back on His own Son? The answer is that by taking our sins upon Himself on the cross, Jesus became cursed – He would be cut off from the presence of God and removed from His blessing. Being holy, God cannot even look upon iniquity – He has to turn His back from His Son and look away.

1 Corinthians 5:21 says, “He (the Father) made Him (the Son) who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” On the cross Jesus bore our sins in His body. All the sins of all humanity throughout history – every sinful deed, every sinful thought – was placed on Jesus. Just bearing my sins would be crushing, but add to that all the billions of people who have ever lived, and the multiplied billions and billions of sins that each have committed and it’s no wonder that Jesus feels the crushing weight that will be placed upon Him, and the dread of being separated from His Father.

The fourth thing we notice about Jesus’ battle in the garden is as He prays, **He expresses His human desire, but submits to His Father’s will.** In verse 39 He walks further into the garden and falls to the ground. His anguish is so great He cannot stand. He prays, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.”

In the Bible, a cup is a symbol of what life hands you. It may hand you a cup overflowing with blessing, as in Psalm 23. It may also hand you a cup of suffering. As Jesus contemplates the wrath of God that is about to be poured out on Him, He asks that the cup be removed. He asks that, if there is any way possible, that He not endure the physical, emotional, and spiritual anguish of the cross. Then He prays, “Yet not my will, but yours be done.”

Jesus models for us how we are to pray. God wants us to pour our hearts out to Him and petition Him for things we desire... “Lord, heal me – take away my cancer, my pain... Lord, restore my relationship with my spouse or my children... Lord, intervene in the life our nation and world. Please Lord.” The Apostle Paul pleaded three times with the Lord to take away His thorn in the flesh.

But Jesus also prays, “Not my will, but yours be done.” I’ve heard some people say, “That makes prayers wimpy. It’s like we ask God in faith to do something and then we add an asterisk next to it that makes it sound like we don’t believe He will answer us.” But praying for God’s will acknowledges that our human will and human perspective only goes so far. What we pray for may not be for our best – God may desire something differently. The great theologian J.I. Packer says, “Here more clearly than anywhere the purpose of prayer becomes plain: not to make God do my will, but to bring my will into line with His.”

Sometimes when we pray and God gives us what we ask for., and sometimes He doesn’t. Jesus prayed, “If possible, take this cup from me.” That makes complete sense from a human perspective – who wants to suffer? But from God’s perspective, Jesus’ suffering the shame and humiliation of the cross would bring salvation to untold millions. From Paul’s perspective, it made sense for God to remove His physical affliction, but God says, “No. I will work through your weakness and you’ll grow in ways you never would have if I had removed your thorn.”

Prayer, in many ways, is exploration. It’s a conversation... “Lord, here is what I desire and why I desire it,” and you pour your heart out to God. Sometimes He says, “Your desire and my will line up,” and He says, “So be it.” Other times He says, “Your desire and will are not aligned.” And when He says that, we can say in complete peace and confidence, “Not my will, but yours be done.”

The fifth thing we learn about Jesus' battle in the garden is that **He is persistent in prayer**. Three times we read that Jesus prays. He prays and returns to find His disciples sleeping. He goes a second time and prays, and after finding His disciples asleep once again, He goes back a third time. It's interesting that Paul also prayed three times. The point is: they stayed with it. They didn't just throw up a casual prayer and move on. They persisted and agonized in prayer. Persistence is not about pestering, it's about dependence on God.

Hebrews 5:7 says, "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, He offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears." My missionary friend from Africa put his finger on one of the reasons our prayers are weak, and that is because we often do not agonize in prayer. Effective prayer takes time and energy, and we have to be willing to pull away from all the distractions and really pray.

Instead of laboring in prayer, our human tendency is to do what Peter does after the soldiers come to arrest Jesus – he gets his sword out and starts swinging. Instead of fighting the unseen enemy in prayer, he fights the pawns of the enemy with his sword. Ephesians 6:12 says, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

When we look at all that is wrong with the world, the real enemy is not the people who post things on social media that make you mad, it's not the politicians that are in power – the real enemy is the unseen forces of evil – the real enemy is Satan who influences people to do evil. In the garden, Jesus recognizes that the real enemy is not the Roman soldiers or the Jewish authorities – it's Satan – and the only weapon that will defeat Him is persistent prayer.

The sixth lesson we learn from Jesus is that **He overcomes the flesh through prayer**. The first time Jesus returns to the disciples after praying, He finds them asleep. Verses 40b-41 says, "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Three times Jesus prays, and three times he returns to find his men sleeping. He singles Peter out, who interestingly will deny the Lord three times.

Notice that He says, "*The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.*" The disciples' spirits are willing to do what's right. Just a few minutes earlier they all pledged to be with Jesus to the end. But their flesh is weak. It's much easier to sleep than to pray. Jesus knows they have good intentions, but that the weakness of the flesh had overpowered their spiritual desire to pray and watch. Jesus fought the same struggle against the flesh, but He overcame it.

One writer says, "The story of the disciples in Gethsemane rings true for all of us. We can so easily be distracted from prayer, worship, or a kind act by hunger, exhaustion, sexual desire, feeling too cold or too hot, thirst, pain, and even a persistent itch. The flesh shouts loudly when it wants something, and the ruckus it makes can easily drown out the desires of the spirit."

Jesus says, "Watch and pray that you do not fall into temptation. Stay spiritually alert because you never know what is going to hit you next. If you're not dependent on God in prayer, you will be left weak and vulnerable."

The seventh and final thing we learn from Jesus' battle is that **through prayer Jesus resolves to do God's will**. Verses 45b-46, "Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

It's interesting when you visit Jerusalem to see that the garden of Gethsemane is located just outside the city walls of Jerusalem, to the west, on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. To the east of Gethsemane is the wilderness. All Jesus has to do is go up the mountain and over the ridge, go into the wilderness, and He's free. The opposite direction – Jerusalem – represents pain and suffering and death. All He has to do is to turn and run. The amazing thing is that Jesus knows His enemies are coming, but He chooses to stay and face His enemies.

Jesus knows something about Satan that we sometimes forget. When we talk about God giving us the armor, which is another passage that helps us understand that we're in a battle, God gives us the armor, He gives us a breastplate, and a shield, and a helmet, and a belt, and a sword, and you are well equipped for the fight, except that there's nothing on your back. Which means if you turn and run, you're a dead duck. That's what Satan knows. If you stay and fight you have armor to protect you – if you turn and run, he can do anything he wants to.

When the soldiers arrive in the garden, the disciples – who slept, who didn't watch and prayer – turn and run. They weren't armored up. But Jesus is ready – by wrestling in prayer, He gained the strength and resolve to face His enemies and obey the will of the Father. He came to the garden anxious and overwhelmed with sorrow, but after communing with His Father, He leaves the garden in peace. He's ready and determined to fulfill His mission.

Human history began in a garden – the garden of Eden – where man fell and sinned – and for believers, life will culminate in a "garden city" where there will be no sin. But between the garden where man fell and the garden where God reigns is the garden of Gethsemane, the garden where Jesus accepted the will of His Father and purchased our salvation on Calvary's tree.

Some of you this morning may be in your own garden of Gethsemane – feeling pressed or squeezed by some situation in life. It may be grief or loss or sickness – it may be doubt or discouragement. Whatever your Gethsemane may be, go to the Lord in prayer. Be alert and watchful. Pour out your heart to Him and seek His will. And in the battle of prayer, you will find the strength to face whatever God has for you.