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Matthew 26:31 - 26:46



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this passage from Matthew 26:31-46, Steve Gregg encourages listeners to pray for strength against temptations and to reconsider their own self-confidence and loyalty. He notes Peter's struggle to stay awake and follow God's will, reminding us that even the strongest may fall under testing. Gregg emphasizes the importance of relying on God's strength, rather than our own, to overcome the spiritual agony of guilt and receive salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus' blood.

Transcript

If you're able to turn with me in the Bible to Matthew 26, I encourage you to do so. If you are driving in your car or for some other reason are indisposed to turn there, then I hope that you might be able to listen along and study these verses with us in this coming half hour. I'm turning to Matthew 26, verse 31.

Jesus has just left, apparently, the upper room, and they were on their way, Jesus and his disciples, to the Mount of Olives, which is where the Garden of Gethsemane was, where Jesus would later that night be betrayed by Judas. And apparently, in route to that place, Jesus speaks, and said to them, All of you will be made to stumble because of me this night, for it is written, I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered. But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee.

Peter answered and said to him, Even if all were made to stumble because of you, I will never be made to stumble. Jesus said to him, Assuredly I say to you that this night before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times. Peter said to him, Even if I have to die with you, I will not deny you.

And so said all the disciples. Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, Sit here while I go and pray over there. And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and he began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed.

Then he said to them, My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with me. He went a little farther and fell on his face and prayed, saying, O my father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.

Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will. Then he came to the disciples and found them asleep, and said to Peter, What? Could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.

He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, O my father, if this cup cannot pass away from me unless I drink it, your will be done. And he came and found them asleep again, for their eyes were heavy. So he left them, went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words.

Then he came to his disciples and 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. Arise, let us be going. See, he who betrays me is at hand.

Now, as Jesus was apparently en route between the upper room and the Garden of Gethsemane, he said, All of you are going to stumble because of me. Now, what does stumble mean? It means that you're going to fail in your faith. Not necessarily permanently.

The Scripture indicates that a good man may stumble seven times, and yet the Lord will lift him up again. And you may stumble in your faith and not be lost permanently. James said, In many things we all stumble, in James chapter 3. And stumbling is something that we do from time to time.

Though it is not something we should do, there are many things that happen that should not happen. Stumbling is when you take a misstep. We're supposed to walk by faith.

When you walk, you're taking steps. If you stumble, you've taken a misstep, and you stumble. Your faith fails you at that moment.

And the disciples at this point, though they believed in Jesus, their faith was going to be greatly challenged and they would all stumble. This was not something that was inevitable. It was just something that was going to happen, and Jesus knew it was going to happen.

It's not as if we have to stumble, but God knows that stumbling is not really very unusual for us. And particularly so when we think ourselves stronger than we are. Because many times when you're walking physically, that is when you're just walking across the room or walking down the street, if you know that this, let's say you're walking down the street, and you know that the pavement has ice on it, well, you're going to be walking very carefully, and you may not slip because of that.

But if you judge the pavement to be dry and safe, you may walk very confidently and carelessly, and may actually trip over something because you're not taking great care because of your great confidence. And when people are overconfident, the danger of stumbling is even greater. It says in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, If any man thinks he

stands, let him take heed lest he fall.

Now the disciples all claimed they wouldn't stumble, and Peter particularly said he would not stumble. And this is one of those occasions when Jesus said to him, Well, Peter, before the cock crows, before the rooster crows tomorrow morning, you will have denied me three times. What an awful prediction that was.

What a terrible impression that probably made on Peter, unless he wasn't listening at all. But we know he remembered it later after it came true and was very grieved. But, I mean, just to hear that prediction from Christ, that you will deny me three times, must have been extremely, extremely grieving to Peter.

And yet what could he say? He had not yet proven Jesus wrong. No doubt he determined he would prove Jesus wrong. But who wants to prove Jesus wrong? I mean, if Jesus turned out to be wrong, that would be very disillusioning.

What a struggle that must have put in Peter to have this predicted of him. But Jesus then came to Gethsemane, and he told the disciples to sit there while I go and pray. And he took three of them, Peter, James, and John, and he took them apparently further into the garden and asked them to pray with him for a while.

And he began to be distressed. He says, My soul is exceedingly sorrowful even to death. Stay here and watch with me.

The word watch, in this case, literally means to stay awake. Now, I realize that the way we use the word watch, it doesn't necessarily mean, I mean, it doesn't have the specific meaning of staying awake, although it's hard to watch when you fall asleep. Watching usually has to do with keeping your eyes focused on some event or some thing that you're watching.

But in the Bible, we read of watching even as we read of fasting. Watching and fasting are two disciplines usually associated with prayer. Fasting is abstinence from food.

Watching is abstinence from sleep. Both of them are associated with making certain sacrifices of your natural habits and pleasures in order to devote more concentrated effort to prayer. So, watching has to do with staying awake.

Fasting has to do with staying hungry. And Jesus asked the disciples, the three that were with him, deeper into the garden there while he prayed, he said, I'm distressed, please stay here and watch with me. That means stay awake with me.

And he went a little farther and fell on his face, and he prayed saying, Oh, my father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will. Now, notice he said, Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.

If it's possible? Isn't everything possible with God? In fact, one of the Gospels has Jesus actually saying, Oh, Father, all things are possible for you. And therefore, if it is possible for this cup to pass from me, please, you know, may it be. Now, how do we understand this? If it is possible? You see, some things are not possible, even for God.

For example, the Bible speaks of it being impossible for God to lie. And it's impossible for him to deny himself. It's impossible for God to be other than just or holy or good or faithful.

There are certain things that God cannot do. He cannot be other than what he is. Just as I cannot be a bird because I'm a man, it's against my nature to be a bird, so God cannot be anything other than the God he is.

And therefore, for him to lie or for him to be unjust or for him to do certain things that would go against his nature, it's simply impossible. He can't do it. Now, what would make it impossible for God to deliver Jesus from the cross, which is what Jesus was referring to when he said, Let this cup pass from me? Why would it not be possible? Couldn't God deliver Jesus from those that wish to crucify him? Well, obviously he could.

And in fact, later on when Jesus was arrested, he told his disciples, If I wanted to, I could call 12 legions of angels and they would deliver me. So the possibility of letting this cup pass from him was not a question of physical possibility. It's not as if God didn't have enough firepower or he didn't have enough strength to deliver Jesus from the powerful men that wanted to crucify him.

He could have called 12 legions of angels and that would have dispatched those men readily. So what was the matter of possibility or impossibility here when Jesus said, If it's possible, let this cup pass from me. It seems obvious that Jesus meant if it is possible for God's purposes to be fulfilled and at the same time for this cup to pass from Jesus, then he wished for it to be so.

Because he said, however, not my will but yours be done. That is to say, your will in this matter, your will for my life, your will and your purpose that you've brought me here for. I want your will to be done.

If it's possible for your will to be done and this cup to pass from me, then so be it. However, there are certain things that aren't possible. It's not possible, for example, for 2 plus 2 to equal 4 and 2 plus 2 to equal 5 at the same time.

It's just not possible. It goes against reality. And it's not possible for God to exist and for God not to exist at the same time.

It would be a contradiction. It is not possible for God to ordain that a certain action will happen and for another person to be responsible for that action. Although many people theologically think it is possible, yet they misunderstand the whole word responsibility.

The responsible party is the one who freely has caused something to come into being. And so for God to cause something to come into being and yet hold someone else responsible is not possible. Because no one is responsible except the one who makes it happen.

And there are certain things that just cannot be reconciled, things that are contrary to one another. Now, God's will in this case was to redeem mankind. It would not be possible for God to do so and at the same time to cause this cup of suffering to pass from Jesus without him drinking it.

It was necessary for man's salvation that Jesus die. And Jesus was struggling with this. He didn't want to be crucified any more than any man would want to be crucified.

And besides that, it's not just the physical pain that Jesus had to endure, but Jesus had to endure the sins the world laid upon him and take the punishment for that. More than just the physical agony of crucifixion, he had to bear the spiritual agony of the guilt of the world laid upon him. And that being so, it was something he would like very much to get out of if it would not thwart God's purposes and plan.

If God, in other words, could think of another way to save humanity without Jesus going to the cross, that's what Jesus was praying might happen. The fact that his father did not let him off the hook and did take him to the cross is one of the strongest evidences that there was no other way that man could be saved. I was asked, I was at a university talking to some students a few weeks ago, and one of the questions that someone asked me said, what scripture would you give to prove that Jesus is the only way that people can be saved, that believing in him is the only way that people can be saved? And they said, what scripture besides the well-known scripture, I am the way, the truth, and the life in John 14, 6, what other scripture would you give? And my answer was that, well, there are scriptures that I could give.

One of them in the book of Acts says that there's none of a name under heaven given among men except for that of Jesus by which we must be saved. But more importantly than any particular scripture is the fact that God did send his son to die for us. If there's some easier way for God to save us, then God made a very poor choice in sacrificing his son.

God must be a very poor economist if he sacrificed the blood of his own son to accomplish that which could have been accomplished for less sacrifice and less cost than that. I can't imagine a cause that I'd quickly sacrifice my son for, and I would certainly never sacrifice my son for any cause that could be accomplished at a lesser cost. And if there was some way that man, simply by being good, or by following some other existing religion, could have been saved, then God would have been, to my mind, rather foolish and wasteful to pay such a price for our salvation as to sacrifice the blood of his son.

The fact that God did not allow Jesus to escape from that cup is the most eloquent proof that there was no other way that man could be saved except through the blood of Jesus. And that's what Jesus was alluding to when he said, if it's possible, let this cup pass from me. That is, let me avoid this suffering and this crucifixion, if it's possible to do that and still accomplish the salvation of the world and still accomplish your will for my life.

As it turned out, of course, it was not possible, and therefore Jesus did not escape that cup. And later on, when he was arrested and Peter tried to defend him with the sword, Jesus said, put away your sword, the cup that my father has given to me. Shall I not drink it? Now what's interesting here is that Jesus went off and prayed three times separately, about a stone's throw away from his disciples, and each time he came back and found them sleeping.

What I find interesting is that in verse 40 it says, then he came to the disciples and found them asleep, and he said to Peter, what, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. Now what's interesting about this to me is that Jesus found all the disciples sleeping, including Peter, but he spoke to Peter and said, Peter, couldn't you stay awake one hour with me? This is particularly poignant in view of the fact that Peter had just been protesting, that nothing could cause him to deny Jesus under any circumstances, no threats of violence, no danger, you know, no temptation could be strong enough to get him to deny Jesus.

And yet Jesus says, Peter, couldn't you even stay awake for an hour? The implication seems to be, you say that you are going to be the epitome of courage in standing up for me under great trial and stress, but you can't even stay awake and pray for an hour? Maybe you should reconsider your self-confidence. And your loyalty. And yet Jesus makes this statement to him, he says, watch and pray so that you do not enter into temptation.

Now this no doubt is a generic statement that would apply to all disciples, but we're told that he said it to Peter. Stay awake and pray so that you don't enter into temptation. You see, Peter was going to be tempted within a few hours time to deny Jesus.

And he needed to be fortified spiritually against that temptation if he hoped to overcome it and be victorious in it. However, Peter did not. He did not wake up.

He did not stay awake and pray for an hour, and therefore, he did not overcome temptation when it came. Some of you listening may be frustrated with recurring sins in your life. Maybe it's sins that happen all the time, and you find yourself regretting it, repenting of it.

Resolving not to do it again, and then you fall right to it again. Or maybe it's a sin that you don't do very often, but you shock yourself when you are surprised by a great

temptation, and you succumb to it, and it's something you thought you would never do. In such a case, you're not very much different than Peter.

And it's possible, I dare say probable, that the solution to your problem is the same as that which Jesus suggested to Peter. Watch and pray so that you do not fall into temptation. Do you spend very much time in preemptive prayer? It seems to me that Christians very commonly, when they fall into sin, they go off and pray and repent and ask for strength and so forth, because they have fallen.

But what about beforehand? Do you think yourself so strong that you will not fall? Jesus indicated we need to spend time staying awake in prayer. If you have a besetting sin that you continually fall to, or one great sin that you may face in the future, or that you have fallen to in the past, you would be very wise to lose sleep in order to pray over that matter. Pray and fast, and watch and pray.

These are the things that we are to do in order to avoid falling into temptation. Remember when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, one thing they were to pray regularly is, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. There is a warfare we are involved in.

The evil one wants to get us to fall into sin on a regular basis. Peter was one of those that the devil was attacking. Jesus gave the secret to overcoming temptation.

There are, of course, many things we can do in different specific situations, but one thing that we always must do is to pray. If we do not pray that we will overcome it, then don't be surprised that you do not overcome it. If you don't pray, you are in effect saying, I can handle this without God's help.

Prayer is a cry for help from God. That is, we pray and we cry for help, that God will help us, and we are acknowledging ourselves weak and in need of necessary supernatural assistance that we do not fall into temptation. Jesus told Peter to take that approach to the coming temptation, and, of course, Peter did not, and he fell to temptation.

He did not stand as he thought he would. Notice Jesus says there in verse 41, The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. Now, Jesus knew this well enough.

His own spirit was willing. He said, Father, not my will, but thine be done. He was willing to do his Father's will, but his own flesh struggled with it.

His own flesh was weak. We read in some of the other Gospels that he struggled with this so much that he sweat as it were great drops of blood there in the garden. Jesus knew well how a weak flesh could make it difficult to carry out the resolutions of a willing spirit.

He was willing to obey his Father, but his flesh was weak. However, notwithstanding the

fact that his flesh was weak, he overcame. His spirit was strong.

He was strong in spirit, and he overcame the weakness of his flesh and the temptation he was facing. But now he's making that comment probably not about himself as much as about Peter. Peter was willing to be loyal.

He was willing to stay awake. He was willing to not deny the Lord. He was willing to do everything right, but he was weak.

His flesh was weak. And just as Peter had said, Lord, if everyone betrays you, I won't deny you. Jesus said, well, your spirit may be willing, but your flesh is weak.

You will, in fact, deny me. And here's a good example of it. I've asked you to stay awake and pray for one hour.

Could you not stay awake one hour and pray with me? Your spirit is willing, but your flesh is very weak. This inability to be true to me enough to obey me in this matter, which is essentially a small matter by comparison, it does not bode well with the likelihood of your being loyal to me when you're scared to death and when you're under pressure to deny me. Jesus said elsewhere, he that is faithful in that which is least is faithful in that which is greatest.

If we can't even pray, if we can't even lose sleep for an hour to pray, then we're fooling ourselves if we think we've got the strength to stand the test of torture or martyrdom or even the test of great temptation. We ought to habitually pray for strength against temptations, even temptations we do not anticipate. And that's what Jesus is telling Peter here.

Your flesh is weak. You need to pray. Your spirit may be willing, but that may not be enough for you if you don't watch and pray that you do not fall into temptation.

And Jesus went and prayed again, twice again. And he came back and he found the disciples sleeping. He just said, well, it's time to wake up.

Here comes the one who's going to betray me. And we'll read of that encounter with the one who betrayed him in our next session together. I hope you'll be able to join us at that time.