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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## THE DARKEST HOUR

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SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ MARCH 10, 2019

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### COMMUNION MEDITATION

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The season of Lent, just begun, is of far greater significance than what some people in our society think. It's not just about swearing off meat or chocolate or cigarettes, or espousing some other self-discipline for a period of six weeks. It is a time in churches when Christians traditionally remember and re-examine the life of Jesus Christ. He was, without compare, the greatest man who ever lived. His impact is beyond our ability to measure. Billions of people have found in Him comfort, inspiration, challenge and hope. Even those who think they know the story well find it meaningful to return to the accounts of that life that was like no other. Today we will revisit a portion of His story—specifically, the final 24 hours before His death.

Our text is in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 26. The bread and the cup have been passed following the Passover meal. It is that sacrament that we will re-enact in a few minutes. After that moving experience, Jesus and 11 of His closest friends travel outside the city to a place called Gethsemane. The name literally means “oil press,” and we will see Jesus being pressed and squeezed as never before.

**T**hen Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” <sup>37</sup>He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. <sup>38</sup>Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

<sup>39</sup>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.”

<sup>40</sup>Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. <sup>41</sup>“Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

<sup>42</sup>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.”

Matthew 26:36-42 (NIV)

### **One Man’s Decision**

Less than two years ago a powerful film was released in theaters entitled *Darkest Hour*. It starred Gary Oldman as Winston Churchill (a role for which he won the Best Actor Oscar at last year’s awards). Though taking minor artistic license, it portrayed the dramatic true story of the crisis in Britain in May 1940. As France was capitulating to the advancing German blitzkrieg, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain was forced to resign and the King asked Churchill, the most vocal critic and opponent of Hitler, to form a government. Many English politicians, still scarred from the brutal struggles of World War I, were terrified of conflict and wanted to make peace with the Nazis at any price—even at great compromise to their freedom, and abandonment of their allies.

In one of the critical moments of history where one man’s choice would determine the course of profound events to follow, Churchill chose to resist the strong pressures to surrender. With incredible resolve and courage against great odds, he decided to fight. He galvanized the will and strength of his people with his memorable speech, ending with the words “we shall never surrender.” Had Churchill not been a leader of courage and resolve, Hitler would have ruled all of Europe—and the world would be profoundly different today. How can the decision of one man have such a great impact?

Let's go back in time more than 1,900 years. Another man faces a lonely decision. Just as the forces of darkness seemed to be closing in on Churchill in May 1940, so they are closing in on Jesus Christ as He kneels, crushed under the heavy burden, in the moonlit Garden of Gethsemane. A wicked conspiracy has been hatched, evil men plotting to carry out the worst crime in human history, against the only truly perfect and completely innocent and righteous person who has ever lived. It is, indeed, the "darkest hour." But this man's solitary decision will have profound and eternal consequences for the entire human race, and lead to an ultimate victory.

### **The Curse of Omniscience**

Jesus in His humanness pleads with His heavenly Father that He might somehow be spared the "cup of suffering" He is about to drink. We can all relate to the dread of drinking something we know will taste terrible. Any of you who have been through the experience of a colonoscopy know what it is like to have to drink all that foul liquid in order to flush out your insides. The stuff works like Drano, and it tastes like it, too. But the cup Jesus was about to drink was far more toxic and painful.

Imagine the curse of omniscience (that is, the ability to know everything). So many times during His earthly ministry of the previous three years we have seen Jesus demonstrating that He has a supernatural knowledge of things that no mortal could attain. He could look inside people and discern their true character and motives. He could predict the future. He could see right through the lies and hypocrisies of His critics. We might think it would be wonderful to know everything, but there is a dark and dangerous side to that. For in this moment Jesus knows everything that is about to happen to Him in the next 12 hours. He can actually feel in advance the excruciating pain of body and mind and soul that awaits Him. No wonder He shrunk back from that ordeal. That's why none of us should ever wish we could see the future: we couldn't handle it.

## The Power of the Will

But now we observe the incredible power of the will. After pleading for relief, Jesus yields Himself to His Father. “I want your will to be done, not mine.” What courage and inner strength! The human will, or capacity to choose, is the supreme battleground. From our choices flow all our actions. Temptation happens in our mind before it ever is acted upon by our body. This greatest of all titanic clashes between God the Son and Satan the Prince of Darkness occurs here in the Garden of Gethsemane. And it was all contained within the mind and soul, all internal. Outwardly the place was peaceful—no sound, no light, nothing to disturb the sleep of 11 tired men. But make no mistake: this was a battlefield.

You and I will also find ourselves, many times throughout life, on the spiritual battlefield of the mind. It is where Satan attacks us. It is where we feel the pressure of our surrounding society and its demands to conform to its values. The mind is where the signals of physical pain are transmitted. It is where the range of troubled emotions repeatedly press on us. We must never feel guilt or shame or a need to apologize for having to fight the inner battle, because Jesus Himself did.

A Christian author named Nancy Guthrie struggled with grief for a period. She had given birth to a baby girl who was seriously handicapped with a rare metabolic disorder; her daughter died when she was just six months old. Nancy wanted to not feel such deep sorrow. After all, she thought, as a Christian shouldn't she be immune to grief and doubt? And then she read the story of Jesus in Gethsemane. It touched and consoled her. She wrote in the margin of her Bible next to this account in Matthew 26 these two words: “Jesus understands.” She has since written this:

Jesus understands what it is like to experience sorrow so heavy that it feels like it is pressing the life out of you ... It helps me to know that Jesus wrestled with the Father's plan even as He sought to submit to it, because I too have wrestled with the Father's plan as I have sought to submit to it.

We, too, at times can feel pain, and grief, and anxiety about the future. We, too, at times can feel rejected and lonely—as Jesus was when His closest friends couldn’t stay awake to support Him. This is all part of being human.

### **The Prayer of Faith**

But the example of our great Hero shows us the way to experience God’s best. And why did God the Father refuse the request of His Son? Because the cross was the only way to secure the redemption of sinful and fallen mankind. If there had been a “Plan B” that would have worked, God would have opted for it. But this was the best choice. This alone would pay for all our sins, the Innocent dying in the place of the guilty, to effect our reconciliation. If Jesus had saved Himself the pain that lay before Him, if He had given in to the human side of His dual nature, He would have been saved—but you and I would have been lost forever.

In all the circumstances of life, surrendering our will to our Father’s will is always the right choice in the end. Though our humanness may struggle, our spirit can overcome it. It is the most important choice we make. And the prayer of faith—“Thy will be done”—is what we say whenever we pray the Lord’s Prayer.

Novelist Jan Karon has written a wonderful series of books about a small town called Mitford in the North Carolina mountains. She puts the profound truth of our scripture in the mouth of her main character, Father Tim, the priest of the Episcopal Church in the town. Father Tim regularly reminds and encourages his parishioners—not just as a ritual, but in the moments of greatest struggle, including facing surgery and fear and sorrow—to “pray the prayer that never fails.” What is that “prayer that never fails”? **“Thy will be done.”** It is placing our lives and the lives of those we love confidently in the hands of our merciful Heavenly Father, whose plan is right—though not always what we think we want.

## His Finest Hour

Let's return to London in 1940. A few months after the "darkest hour" decision of Churchill to not surrender to Hitler but to stand alone against him, he gave another memorable speech. It ends in these words:

Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, "**This was their finest hour.**"

Of all the amazing things that Jesus said and did in His years on earth, of all the miracles and healings, the profound parables and the paradigm-altering ethical teachings, I think it is correct to say that His time spent in the agony of Gethsemane, wrestling with and overcoming His greatest temptation and weakness, was indeed His finest hour. ■

