

Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

26:36-46

by J.C. Ryle

Transcript

The verses we have now read describe what is commonly called Christ's agony at Gethsemane. It is a passage which undoubtedly contains deep and mysterious things. We ought to read it with reverence and wonder, for there is much in it which we cannot fully comprehend. Why do we find our Lord so sorrowful and very heavy, as he is here described? What are we to make of his words, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto death." Why do we see him going apart from his disciples, and falling on his face, and crying to his Father with strong cries, and thrice repeated prayer? Why is the almighty Son of God, who had worked so many miracles, so heavy and disquieted? Why is Jesus, who came into the world to die, so like one ready to faint at the approach of death? Why is all this? There is but one reasonable answer to these questions: the weight that pressed down our Lord's soul was not the fear of death and its pains. Thousands have endured the most agonizing sufferings of body, and died without a groan, and so, no doubt, might our Lord. But the real weight that bowed down the heart of Jesus was the weight of the sin of the world, which seems to have now pressed down upon him with peculiar force: it was the burden of our guilt imputed to him, which was now laid on him, as on the head of the scapegoat. How great that burden must have been no human heart can conceive! It is known only to God. Well may the Greek Litany speak of the unknown sufferings of Christ. The words of Scott on this subject are probably correct: "Christ at this time endured as much misery of the same kind with that of condemned spirits, as could possibly consist with a pure conscience, perfect love of God and man, and an assured confidence of a glorious event." But however mysterious this part of our Lord's history may seem to us, we must not fail to observe the precious lessons of practical instruction which it contains. Let us now see what those lessons are. Let us learn in the first place that prayer is the best practical remedy that we can use in time of trouble. We see that Christ himself prayed when his soul was sorrowful: all true Christians ought to do the same. Trouble is a cup that all must drink in this world of sin: we are born unto trouble as surely as sparks fly upward ("Job 5:7"); we cannot avoid it. Of all creatures, none is so vulnerable as man: our bodies, our minds, our families, our business, our friends, are all so many doors through which trial will come in. The holiest saints can claim no exemption from it: like their Master, they are often men of sorrow. But what is the first thing to be done in time of trouble? We must pray. Like Job, we must fall down and worship ("Job"); like Hezekiah, we must spread our matters before the Lord ("2 Kings 19:14"). The first person we must turn to for help must be our God. We must tell our Father in heaven all our sorrow; we must believe confidently that nothing is too trivial or minute to be laid before him, so long as we do it with entire submission to his will. It is the mark of faith to keep nothing back from our best Friend: so doing, we may be sure we shall have an answer.

"If it be possible, and the thing we ask is for God's glory, it shall be done: the thorn in the flesh will either be removed, or grace to endure it will be given to us, as it was to St. Paul (1 Cor. 12:9). May we all store up this lesson against the day of need. It is a true saying that prayers are the leeches of care." Let us learn in the second place that entire submission of will to the will of God should be one of our chief aims in this world. The words of our Lord are a beautiful example of the spirit that we should follow after in this matter: he says, "Not as I will, but as thou wilt." He says again, "Thy will be done." A will unsanctified and uncontrolled is one great cause of unhappiness in life. It may be seen in little infants; it is born with us. We all like our own way. We wish and want many things, and forget that we are entirely ignorant what is for our good, and unfit to choose for ourselves. Happy is he who has learned to have no wishes, and in every state to be content! It is a lesson which we are slow to learn and, like St. Paul, we must learn it not in the school of mortal man, but of Christ (1 Philippians). Do we want to know whether we are born again and growing in grace? Let us see how it is with us in the matter of our wills. Can we bear disappointment? Can we put up patiently with unexpected trials and vexations? Can we see our favorite plans and darling schemes crossed, without murmuring and complaint? Can we sit still, and suffer calmly, as well as go up and down and work actively? These are the things that prove whether we have the mind of Christ. It ought never to be forgotten that warm feelings and joyful frames are not the truest evidences of grace: a mortified will is a far more valuable possession. Even our Lord himself did not always rejoice; but he could always say, "Thy will be done." Let us learn in the last place that there is great weakness even in true disciples of Christ, and that they have need to watch and pray against it. We see Peter, James and John, those three chosen apostles, sleeping when they ought to have been watching and praying. We find our Lord addressing them in these solemn words: "Watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation. The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak." There is a double nature in all believers. Converted, renewed, sanctified as they are, they still carry about with them a mass of indwelling corruption, a body of sin. St. Paul speaks of this, when he says, "I find a law that when I would do good evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man; but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind" (1 Romans 7). The experience of all true Christians in every age confirms this. They find within two contrary principles, and a continual strife between the two; to these two principles our Lord alludes when he addresses his half-awakened disciples: he calls the one "flesh" and the other "spirit." He says, "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." But does our Lord excuse this weakness of his disciples? Be it far from us to think so. Those who draw this conclusion mistake his meaning. He uses that very weakness as an argument for watchfulness and prayer; he teaches us that the very fact that we are encompassed with infirmity should stir us up continually to watch and pray. If we know anything of true religion, let us never forget this lesson. If we desire to walk with God comfortably, and not to fall like David or Peter, let us never forget to watch and pray. Let us live like men on enemy's ground, and be always on our guard. We cannot walk too carefully; we cannot be too jealous over our souls. The world is very ensnaring; the devil is very busy. Let your Lord's words ring in our ears daily, like a trumpet. Our spirits may sometimes be very willing; but our flesh is also very weak. Then let us always watch and always pray.

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