

The Battle in Gethsemane

An Easter Meditation

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At Easter we find ourselves giving special thought to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. It seems appropriate therefore, that we should come back again to that scene of battle in the garden of Gethsemane: the battlefield on which the most solemn and critical battle of all human history was fought. It was a battle in which our Lord was triumphant. And if, for the moment, we could think the unthinkable, had he failed every one of us would have perished.

We who owe our salvation to Christ will be more than interested to follow the exercises and preparations in the heart of the Son of God. As we remember again what our salvation cost him, it will inevitably deepen and increase our love and devotion to the Saviour. Devotion to the Lord Jesus is the secret of any truly successful Christian life. Paul said, 'I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me' (Gal 2:20).

The more it grips our hearts that Christ gave himself for me, the more we shall be spurred on to live unreservedly for him. When he gave himself for us, it was not in a moment of generosity thereafter to be repented of. Some of us give presents in that manner. We may go out to buy a Christmas present for someone, and we intend to spend £10. We see one of those beautiful things in the shop, and through the psychology of the salesperson we are told how marvellous it is and how suitable it would be. The price is £30—we buy it, and regret it ever after!

When Christ gave himself for us it was not in some careless, frivolous moment of unplanned generosity, but rather after the tremendous struggle in Gethsemane. As we consider our Lord's exercise in the garden we shall not only find our devotion increase, we shall also learn lessons as to how we can fight and overcome temptation. On the cross our blessed Lord was alone. In the garden he invited three of his apostles to draw near, as near as they could, so that from watching him in his great hour they might learn lessons whereby they might face temptation. We shall need to learn those lessons and then put them into practice.

Three gospel writers tell us about Gethsemane: Matthew, Mark and Luke. By and large they all repeat the same story, but each has his particular emphasis.

Matthew will show us that in the battle of temptation there is a need to develop self-control of our *bodies*.

Mark teaches the same lesson, but also emphasizes that we must learn how to control our *emotions*.

Luke repeats what the others have said, but points out how to handle and control our human *will*.

Body, emotions, will—these all make up our human personality.

Matthew: control of our bodies

As a gospel writer Matthew is concerned to persuade us all to take our lives and hand them over to Jesus Christ. What is our reaction to that call? Do we ask, 'What will happen to our lives if we hand them over to Christ? Has he any idea how valuable our lives are to us?'

Matthew's Gospel tells us about the Lord Jesus as king and how he treats his subjects. To help us see the point Matthew first tells us of other rulers.

The Kings. King Herod the Great was ruling when our Lord was born. When he heard that Messiah had been born he sent out his soldiers and they massacred every child under the age of two (Matt 2:16). Why? He was afraid that somebody would steal his authority. He wanted to be king. Like many politicians, he had probably rubbed the curly heads of the infants; but when it came to it he was going to be king. If he could be king to the benefit of his subjects then he would, but if he could not he would still be king. And if he had to massacre innocent children in cold blood to get the power he would do that too. Herod's son, Archelaus, reigned in Judaea after his father's death but he apparently had the same outlook (2:22).

Then there came another Herod, but he was not much better. He had decided not to execute John the Baptist but his wife knew how to get round him (king and all that he was), and she wanted John dead. He held a birthday party. During the celebrations she sent in her daughter to dance before the half-drunk Herod. As she danced he completely lost his self-control and, to show himself off as a powerful man, he promised to give her anything up to half of his kingdom. She consulted her mother who told her to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter (14:8). The king did not want to do it, for it was a fearful crime to execute any citizen who was innocent. To execute a prophet of God who was innocent was worse still. Herod knew that John was innocent, but he had so lost control of himself that he gave the order, and John's head was taken from his body.

The Priests. They also were in a position of power. After they had conducted the trial of our Lord, Judas came in. He flung down the silver in the treasury and said, 'I have sinned, in that I have betrayed innocent blood' (27:4). He was on the brink of hell, with a tormented conscience. He came to the men whose job it was to help him and to show him the way to forgiveness and eternal peace with God, but they said, 'What is that to us? You see to it.' How sad! They were charged with the spiritual care of their flock, but they had no interest in their souls. Judas went out from them into eternity, unsaved and uncared for.

Pilate, the governor. He was there to see that justice was done and that no innocent person was murdered. When the crowd gathered round and shouted and shouted and shouted, he saw that he could prevail nothing, governor and all that he was. He lost control completely, washed his hands, and said to the crowd, 'See you to it' (27:24). It was not their job to see to it; it was his job. For a Roman governor to fling an innocent man to that raving mob was a serious dereliction of duty.

Will Christ be trustworthy? Can we trust our lives to him? He too was a king. He too shed blood in order to establish his kingdom. But it was not his citizens' blood; it was his own blood. We should not fear to hand our lives over to him, body, soul and spirit. Did he give his life and afterwards regret having done so? Was it because he could not help himself nor resist the circumstances? No! Matthew tells us how Christ gave himself for us with sublime and perfect self-control.

Were the disciples trustworthy? In the garden Christ said to them, 'Watch with me . . . pray that you enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak' (26:38, 41). They could not watch, and they could not pray. They lost control of their bodies and went off to sleep. Their eyes were heavy; they struggled and lost control. Suddenly the armed soldiers were upon them. Peter had one sword. Christ had forbidden him to use it, but he could not resist the temptation to try to stop the soldiers; in fact, to try to stop our Lord being killed! It was a natural reaction, but if Peter had succeeded we would all have been lost. He went to cut the man's head off and missed. He just got his ear. (It is very difficult to use a sword if you are not used to it, and especially when you have just wakened up!)

Against this background, see the beauty of self-control in our Lord. 'Put your sword back into its place. Do you not realize, Peter, that if I had asked my Father, this very moment he would give me twelve legions of angels, and every angel with a sword?' (26:52–53). Twelve legions of swords, and every one of them superhuman! Was there any temptation to use them? Peter only had one sword and he could not stop himself from using it. What would have happened if he had had twelve legions of them? Our Lord had the self-control to have every one of them sheathed. He could have defended himself against those ungodly and wicked men; but if he had used those swords how would Scripture be fulfilled (v. 54)? That should move our hearts!

As we watch our Lord overcome that temptation in the garden and go on and die for us, we remember that there are Scriptures that we too must fulfil. The danger is that we forget that the flesh is weak. If our bodies are to be brought under the control of the Holy Spirit, we must watch and pray (26:41). 'Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour' (1 Pet 5:8).

We may intend to fulfil God's Word, but to do so we shall require the vigorous discipline of prayer to bring our bodies under control. A little sleep, nodding off, becoming careless will mean that before we know where we are temptation is upon us, and we cannot resist it.

Mark: control of our emotions

Emotions are difficult things to control. Mark tells us that Peter had told the Lord Jesus, 'If I must go to prison and death for you I will do it. You can count on me, Lord!' (Mark 14:31). He probably thought he meant it, but he had not a clue as to the preparations necessary to face it.

Later on that evening, on hearing the hubbub in the garden a young man who lived in a house nearby, and who had gone to bed, came down in his nightclothes to see what was going on (v. 51). As he entered Gethsemane he felt some very strong hands grip him, and he heard the clash of swords and spears. He ran for his life. The soldiers went to arrest him, gripped his clothes, and he ran away naked (v. 52). He had just come down out of interest, but was not prepared for what was really happening. In a moment of enthusiasm it is so easy to say, 'Yes, I will follow the Lord Jesus. Anywhere, everywhere I will follow him—even to the cross!'

How different our Lord was. He did not come running into the garden saying, 'God, I am ready for anything you want. This cup—yes I will drink it; I will do anything you ask!' In that cup was the wrath of God against our sins. Can we imagine our Lord running in and boasting that he would drink it any day of the week he was asked to? Did he want to do it? Certainly not! The very thought caused sweat to run down his cheeks until it dropped off heavily like drops of blood. All the emotions of his being were against doing it. Did our Lord go to the cross, glad to do it: glad of the occasion, saying, 'I enjoy being forsaken by God'? Of course not! The inner feeling in his body was against doing it. It was honestly that he prayed in the garden, 'Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will' (14:36 ESV).

We dare not suggest that he was not sincere. He meant it. Emotionally he did not want to do it, but the will of God meant that he must do it. So he prayed, 'Not what I will, but what you will.' That is how we should handle our emotions. We thank God for giving us all the lovely tasks we enjoy doing, and there would be something wrong with God if his service were always some agonizing experience. His service is a lovely thing, and there are a thousand and one tasks on earth (and there will be many in heaven), the doing of which bring nothing but sheer delight to us. But there are tasks to be done that are not pleasant. We must learn to cope with them and control our emotions.

Some of us are very easily put off. We serve the Lord if we feel like it, and if we do not feel like it we do not do it. We will pray, read the Bible, take a Sunday School class if we feel like it. Often we do not feel like doing it, and instead of being spiritually motivated we become merely emotionally motivated. At the Lord's Supper we know that we should thank the Lord for dying for us, but because we do not really feel like doing it we may feel that it would be a little hypocritical. So we do not do it! How would we feel if we sent someone a present and did not hear from them? We may eventually ask if they had received it. They did, but they did not thank us because they did not feel like doing so—they didn't know what to say! They get so embarrassed talking to people who give them gifts; they feel so insincere that they rarely thank people for giving them. It is our duty to say thanks, no matter what we feel like.

There are times when we must learn to go against our emotions. There are times that we may not consciously enjoy doing some task for him; but we must train ourselves to do it. We must obey God's will when we feel like doing it, and when we do not.

Luke: control of the will

Luke's emphasis is not on self-control of our bodies, nor on how to cope with emotions, but on the control of our will. He tells us that when they came to arrest him, our Lord Jesus said, 'This is your hour and the power of darkness' (Luke 22:53). The people who came to arrest him were under the power of Satan. They were in the power of darkness.

Everyone is born under that power. In one of the New Testament's descriptions of conversion we are exhorted to 'give thanks to the Father, who has delivered us from the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son' (Col 1:13). How does Satan maintain his power over people? He tells them that God is a tyrant, and that having their own way is freedom. When we get converted we do not necessarily stop liking and wanting our own way.

Listen to the crowd around Pilate shouting their heads off. Pilate asks, 'What wrong has he done?' (Luke 23:22). Luke shows us that they shouted on and on (vv. 18, 21, 23). In the end their shouts prevailed. Pilate released Barabbas and handed Jesus over to their will (v. 25). On the way to Calvary there were women who saw the terrible state of the abused Jesus—his back bleeding, his head crowned with thorns. They mourned and wailed for him:

And there followed him a great company of people, and of women, which also bewailed and lamented him. But Jesus turning unto them said, Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children. (vv. 27–28)

Did they realize the final result of having their own way?

Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us'. For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?' (vv. 30–31)

That is where having our own way will lead to. Many people remain unsaved because they think that if they were to be saved they would have to give up their own way. And so they would! 'Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return to the LORD, and he shall have compassion on him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon' (Isa 55:7).

See Jesus Christ our Lord, the King of kings, on his way to God's throne. He kneels prostrate in prayer, saying, 'Not my will, but thine, be done' (Luke 22:42).

And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:8–11)

He is now exalted, and has gone there in obedience to God by suffering and death for our sins. Why should we obey him? Because he never asks us to do anything he has not done himself:

Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared: Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him. (Heb 5:7-9)

That night he came to the garden of Gethsemane for the last time. He had been there many times before, but never had he prayed with such intensity as on that night when he faced Calvary. None of us knows what crisis we may have to face one of these days. In this country God has especially favoured us for many centuries, whilst other Christians in the world have known no public liberty. We have no guarantee that God will preserve it for us. There may come days of great crisis for us, when to stand for the Lord or meet together with other believers will be to face great persecution and suffering.

Let us resolve before God to control our bodies, our emotions and our wills, and be prepared to do his will—whatever it may be. ‘Whoever does the will of God abides for ever’ (1 John 2:17 ESV).

About the Author

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