Jesus’ Prayer in Gethsemane

Matthew 26:17-75

Key Verse: 26:39 “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.”

The movie “The Passion of the Christ” is an epic about the last 12 hours of Jesus’ life beginning with his prayer in Gethsemane and ending with his resurrection. Even though the movie received some critical reviews, it is known as the most realistic and descriptive movie about the last hours of Jesus’ life. The movie lasts more than two hours, but my message today takes less than 30 minutes. In today’s passage we’ll learn of the spiritual significance and redemptive meaning behind Jesus’ passion and crucifixion. We will also study the meaning of the new covenant which Jesus established in his own blood. The Passion Week is coming up. I pray that we may learn again the meaning of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection through this passage.

First, the Last Supper (17-30) When you hear about the word “the Last Supper”, you immediately remember the mural painting of Leonardo Da Vinci in the late 15th century, which he painted in the Church of the Holy Mary of Grace in Milan, Italy. In verses17-19, Jesus asked his disciples to prepare for the Passover meal, which would be his last supper with his disciples on this earth. (19) The Passover meal was eaten to commemorate God’s deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. During the meal, the Israelites ate a roasted lamb with bitter herbs, broke unleavened bread, and drank wine. For the Israelites, having the Passover meal was more than a family gathering, but a celebration of God’s liberation. Like little children Jesus’ disciples were excited at having dinner with their master Jesus. No one wanted their joyful mood and vigorous appetite to be disturbed. But while Jesus was eating, he said, “***Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.***” (21) Jesus predicted Judas’ betrayal. The disciples were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, ***“Surely you don’t mean me, Lord***?” (22) They did not want to even imagine betraying their master. Jesus replied, ***“The one who had dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born***.” (23,24) The one who had dipped his hand into the bowl with Jesus was the one who was very close to Jesus. Jesus meant Judas Iscariot, who had agreed to hand him over to his enemies for thirty pieces of silver. (15,16) Judas said, “Surely you don’t mean me, Rabbi?” ***Jesus answered, “You have said so***.” (25) The old NIV says, “Jesus answered, “*Yes, it is you*.” By saying this Jesus gave an opportunity to Judas to repent and stand on his side.

Betrayal is the most painful trial to bear. It is like being stabbed by a knife in the back. Our God was hurt when men sinned against Him. Men’s sin is an act of betrayal against God’s love. God made men in his own image and planted the Garden of Eden for men’s happiness. God also made women as man’s suitable helpers. God provided the best environment and condition for men’s happiness. But men betrayed God and stood on Satan’s side after the temptation. God’s heart was broken. Jesus loved Judas Iscariot and called him to be his disciple. Being chosen by Jesus was a great blessing and privilege for Judas. His name could have been written in the Book of Life and remembered as a Saint in human history. But he betrayed Jesus and became a tool of Satan. He returned Jesus’ favor with betrayal. As Jesus said, it would be better for him if he had not been born. Jesus bore the pain of Judas’ betrayal. Jesus bears not only Judas’ betrayal, but also all peoples’ betrayal, including you and me. How many times do we betray our Lord Jesus in order to compromise with this world? How often do we reject him in our decisions and occasions? Still, Jesus bears our rebellion and rejection and loves us to the end!

Look at verses 26. “***While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.***” Bread, the unleavened bread, is one of the foods at the Passover meal. God commanded the Israelites to eat the unleavened bread so that they might remember God’s deliverance and their hastiness during their exodus. (Ge 12:11,15) Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “*Take and eat; this is my body*.” Here the bread is the metaphor of Jesus’ body. Breaking the bread means tearing his body on the cross. Jesus’ body would be torn apart when nails and spears pierced him. Sharing the pieces of the bread symbolizes sharing Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus said, *“I am the bread of life…Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day*.” (Jn 6:35, 54) Sharing his body means union with Christ Jesus. By eating the bread Jesus wanted his disciples to be one as he became one with his Father. By eating bread we also become one in Jesus by sharing his suffering, death, and resurrection. This is the reason why we share bread during communion.

Look at verses 27-29. “***Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.***” Wine is also a food at the Passover meal. According to Mishnah, by drinking cups of wine, the Jews were to remember God’s grace and the blood of the lamb which had been sacrificed. Jesus took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “*Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*.” Here Jesus compares the cup of wine to his own blood which would be shed on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus said, “*This is my blood of the covenant*.” Jesus established a new covenant in his own blood. The covenant is an unbreakable contract between God and men for men’s salvation. In Exodus 24:8 Moses had established a blood covenant which the Lord God had made with his people the Israelites. But at that time the blood was animal’s blood, the blood of goats and calves, whose efficacy was imperfect and limited. (Heb 9:12) Now Jesus establishes the new covenant in his own blood, the flawless and holy blood of the Son of God. The blood covenant of Jesus brings perfect and eternal redemption for all mankind. (Heb 9:12-14)

John Stott, the British preacher and Bible scholar, said that this blood covenant of Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah in the Old Testament. Jeremiah 31:31-34. “*The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, ...This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people…For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more*.” God fulfilled Jeremiah’s prophecy through the covenant of Jesus’ blood. God will forgive our wickedness and he will remember our sins no more. Jesus’ blood satisfied the requirement of God’s righteousness for our sins. This is why Jesus said about his blood, “*which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*.”

The eating of the bread and drinking from the cup of wine by the disciples meant that they were not spectators, but participants in God’s redemptive work. It also means that by eating the bread and drinking the wine we also receive Jesus as our Lord and Christ who saves us from our sins. Jesus said in John 6:56, “*Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.*” This time I ask you to receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Paul said, “when you confess with your mouth that Jesus is the Lord and believe in him in your heart, you will be saved”. (Ro 10:9,10) Amen!

Look at verse 29. “***I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.***” In this verse Jesus indicated that this Last Supper reached not only to his death at Calvary, but also to the heavenly banquet. During the Passover meal the Jews drink four cups of wine based on the fourfold promises of Exodus, and each cup has its own meaning. The fourth cup Jesus took indicates Jesus’ consummated banquet in his kingdom. On that day his disciples would be with him in his kingdom. What a hope we have in Jesus!

Second, Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane. (31-46) After Jesus finished the Last Supper with his disciples, they went out to the Mount of Olives. There Jesus predicted his disciples’ escape and Peter’s denial saying, “***This very night you will fall away on account of me, it is written: “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.” But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.***” (31,32) Peter replied, “***Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will***.” (33) Peter was confident of his loyalty to Jesus, but Jesus said, “***Truly I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times***.” (34) Jesus predicted Peter’s denial in advance so that in the future Peter might acknowledge his weakness and overcome his failure and despair at the hour of Jesus’ arrest. But Peter declared, ***“Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.”*** And all the other disciples did the same. (35)

Gethsemane is the enclosed garden located on the western slopes of Mount of Olive, separated from Jerusalem by the Kidron Valley. This garden was the place where Jesus often visited and prayed. That night Jesus took his three disciples, Peter, John, and James to the garden to pray. Jesus said, “***Sit here while I go over there and pray***.” (36) Jesus’ heart was deeply troubled with his upcoming trials and death on the cross. (37) So he asked his disciples to pray with him saying, “***My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me***.” (38) Jesus knew that the hour had come and that he could not avoid the upcoming trials and death. The tremendous sorrow and heavy burdens were too much for him to bear. He asked his disciples to be with him and participate in the spiritual battle together with him.

Look at verse 39. “***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.***” Jesus knew how painful it would be for him to take the cup. The cup was not only the cup of his suffering and death, but also the cup of God’s wrath against the sins of the world. If it was possible, Jesus wanted to avoid drinking the cup. He asked God the Father for any alternative way which could replace him drinking the cup. Even though Jesus is the Son of God, he shared our humanness. Like all of us, he also experienced pain, sorrow, and fear. He knew how painful it would be when his hands and feet were nailed to the cross. He knew how shameful it would be when he was hung on the tree naked with other criminals. So he wanted to avoid the crucifixion if God the Father could provide the other way. But he knew what the Father’s will was. Jesus knew that the way the Father provided was the way of cross, the way of obedience. This is why he prayed, “*Yet not as I will, but as you will*.”

When Jesus returned to his disciples, what were they doing? Jesus found them sleeping. The disciples slept instead of praying. Jesus said to them. “***Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak***.” (40,41) Jesus knew that their spirit was willing, but their body were weak. Still, Jesus wanted them to pray because they would easily fall into temptation if they did not pray.

Jesus went away a second time and had the same prayer, “***My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done***.” (42) Jesus had the same prayer one more time. Still, his disciples were sleeping while Jesus was praying. When Jesus came back from the third prayer, he said to his disciples, “***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!***” (45,46) Even though his disciples were just as sleepy and weak, Jesus became completely different after he had returned from his prayer. Before he went to pray, he was like a sheep which was on the way to be slaughtered. But after he came back from prayer, he became like a triumphal general returning from a heroic war. Jesus became bold and confident about drinking the cup. He was willing to drink the cup. He overcame the power of sin and conquered death.

Long time ago there was a man named Adam in the Garden of Eden. God loved him and blessed him. But Adam failed in Satan’s temptation. He disobeyed God and brought sin and death to this world. Adam lost the garden and was destined to die. But now in another garden, in the Garden of Gethsemane, the second Adam Jesus Christ obeyed the Father’s will and won his spiritual battle. He restored God’s glory through his obedience. He restored forgiveness of sin and eternal life for men through his triumphal prayer and substitutional death. No more does sin rule men because Jesus would die for our sins on the cross. No more does death overrule men because Jesus would defeat death through his resurrection. Hebrews says, “*Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death- that is, the devil*.” (Heb 2:14) Hebrews continues, “*Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.*” (Heb 5:8,9) The Easter Conference is coming up. I earnestly urge all of us to experience spiritual victory through Jesus’ Gethsemane prayer. First, I want you to join the early morning prayer. Even though you are busy and tired, I encourage you to make your body obedient to God’s will. Second, I encourage you to memorize 1 Corinthians 15 so that we may strengthen our resurrection faith. While Jesus’ disciples slept, Jesus was praying. They failed because they didn’t remember Jesus’ words. If we don’t pray, if we don’t have words of God in our hearts, we fall into temptation. Third, I encourage you to share this good news of salvation with your friends through the Easter conference. There are many people around us who suffer from the power of sin and death. I believe that this conference provides an opportunity for them to hear the gospel messages. Amen!

Jesus knew our weakness more than anyone else. This is why he predicted Judas’ betrayal and Peter’s denial. Jesus knew his three top disciples’ failure in prayer. Still, Jesus encouraged them to watch and pray. Later Peter made mistakes at the hour of Jesus’ arrest. He drew a sword and cut off an ear of the servant of the high priest. (51) He followed Jesus at a distance while Jesus was being arrested. (57) While Jesus was being tried before the Sanhedrin, he denied Jesus three times before people. (69-75) He loved Jesus and was loyal to Him. He made a vow that he would never fall away on account of Jesus. But he failed in keeping his words. His human love and loyalty failed at this time in following Jesus. He should have listened to Jesus and watched and prayed. He ought to have learned from Jesus, who won a spiritual battle through earnest prayer.

In today’s passage we learned about Jesus’ blood covenant for the sins of the world. Jesus died for our sins on the cross. He shed his precious blood, and his body was torn into pieces when the nails pierced his bone and flesh. Through his sacrificial death, God’s redemption was completed. Whoever eats his flesh and drinks his blood will be forgiven and will be saved. We must remember Jesus’ prayer in the Garden and learn his obedient prayer. We must win the spiritual battle by denying ourselves and obeying God’s will. God wants us to go into our own Gethsemane, the place where we have a personal fellowship with God. I want all of us to meet God and Jesus very personally in your Garden. Amen!