

**Sermon preached by Pastor Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Thursday, April 5, 2007
Maundy Thursday**

THE PRAYER OF SURRENDER

Matthew 26:36-46

Listen again to the prayer Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, not once, not twice, but three times the night before He went to the cross and died a condemned criminal:

My Father, if it is possible, let this cup be taken away from me. Yet not my will, but Your will be done (Matthew 26:39; cf 26:42, 44).

As He contemplated what lay ahead – and Jesus knew what lay ahead – we are told that Jesus was deeply distressed in His spirit. To Peter, James and John, the three disciples He had brought with Him to a secluded spot in the garden, He confided: “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Matthew 26:38).

That is transparent honesty, isn't it? Do we think less of Jesus because in His humanity He felt what any of us would have felt in those circumstances? Do we think any less of the brave men and women of our military forces because they may feel fear in their hearts before placing themselves in harm's way? Absolutely not.

Jesus was being real in the garden. And I love Him all the more for it, because it shows that He understands our feelings. Our fears. Our anguish of soul. His heart was so heavy with anguish that it almost killed Him. So intense was His anguish, Luke says (Luke 22:44), that His perspiration was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

In the middle of Luke's Gospel, in Luke 9:51, there is a striking verse which is nonetheless easy to overlook. It says that as the time drew near for Him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus set His face to go to Jerusalem.

What does that mean? It means that Jesus knew why He had come. It means that He understood and accepted His mission. It means that Jesus knew what was in store for Him. It means that He was not an unfortunate victim of circumstances or of a plan gone bad. It means that His death was not a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

You see, Jesus could have avoided the cross if He had chosen to. He did not have to go up to Jerusalem the last time. And having gone, He could have made a deal with the Jewish leaders. He could have worked out a compromise with Caiaphas. Pilate, the Roman governor, wanted to release Him, if only Jesus would say the right words that would enable him to do so. If only Jesus would toe the line of what was politically correct. Even in Gethsemane, in the Garden on the night of His betrayal, there were both time and opportunity for Him to escape. But instead, Jesus willingly submitted to the will of the Father.

As you examine the life and death of Jesus, it becomes clear that the suffering of Jesus on the cross for us was the will of God. On at least three occasions (Mark 8:31-32; 9:31; 10:32-34) Jesus told His disciples that suffering, rejection and death awaited Him in Jerusalem. He knew it was the will of the Father for His life.

There in Gethsemane, the “olive garden,” Jesus knew what was on the horizon. He knew that the time had come. He knew what tomorrow would bring. Already He stood in the shadow of the cross. Tomorrow it would be not Gethsemane but Golgotha. Not the garden spot but the Place of the Skull. Jesus knew it was all part of the Father’s plan.

He knew tonight would be His last night. And He wanted to be alone, so deep was the anguish and the sorrow and the distress of His soul as He thought about what tomorrow would bring. And yet He also wanted – and needed – the support and comfort of His friends.

Think about this for a moment. Why did Jesus take Peter, James and John with Him into the garden? Was it because there was one last lesson He wanted to teach them? Was it to talk strategy? I don’t think so. I think it was simply because He felt the need for them to be there, just to be there, for Him. He wanted them to pray for Him. He needed them to stand by Him in the dark night of His soul. In all His humanness, Jesus needed them.

Do you have friends you can lean on when you are going through tough times? Do you have “3 AM” friends you can call on any time, no matter what you’re dealing with? Just as important, are you that kind of friend? Are you the kind of friend others can count on and lean on when they are dealing with the troubles and trials and heartaches of life?

All of us need to know we’ve got a friend, as James Taylor still sings – a friend who will come running, a friend who will be there in our time of need, somebody to stand by, to give a hug, to listen, to pray. That is what Jesus needed from His friends in the garden. And that is the kind of friend God desires us to be for one another. For those we love and care about. For those who love and care about us. And for those who feel that nobody cares.

There is a lesson in the garden about friendship. About our need for one another. But even more, there is a lesson in the garden about surrender. Surrender to the sovereign wisdom and will of God.

Death was staring Jesus in the face. Not just death, but the worst and most awful kind of death one could imagine.

But even more, as if the horror of death by crucifixion weren’t enough by itself, for Jesus the cup of suffering He had to drink – the cup which became for us the cup of salvation – meant taking upon Himself the full weight of the world’s sin, yours and mine included, and bearing in His own body, in His soul, the full fury of God’s righteous wrath against sin.

It wasn't the cross itself, as horrible as it was, that overwhelmed the soul of Jesus with grief. It was what the cross meant:

- The wrath of God that you and I deserve.
- The hell of being cut off from fellowship with the Father.
- The horror of being forsaken by God.

Every ounce of His humanness shrank from that cup. Never forget that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human.

What did Jesus do in that hour? He prayed. The prayer He prayed was honest and to the point. He didn't try to impress His Father with pious language. He didn't try to sweet-talk God the Father to persuade Him to change His mind. He didn't try to bargain with God. He didn't try to play "Let's Make a Deal" the way we sometimes do.

No. He simply laid bare His soul. He told the Father what was in His heart. He said: "If there is any other way... But if it is not possible, if there is no other way, if the cross is the only way, then Your will be done."

The honest desire of His heart was: "Let this cup pass from me." But what He desired more than anything, and the thing to which Jesus was absolutely committed in life and in death, was this: "Not my will but Yours be done."

Nobody in His right mind wants to suffer. But what we see as we fix our eyes on Jesus in the garden is that He was willing. He was willing to drink the cup. He was willing to endure the cross. He was willing to undergo its suffering. He was willing to despise its shame. He was willing to bear the weight of our sins in His body on the cross. He was willing. Why? Because He was unalterably committed to the Father's will. He was willing to say, whatever the cost: "Not my will but Yours be done." Not what I want, but what You want, O God.

Can you say that tonight?

I do not mean: Could you have said what Jesus said, and done what Jesus did, if you were in His place? None of us could ever take His place.

The question is: Can you say in your life right now, in the circumstances of your life tonight: "Not my will but Yours"? Can you pray the prayer of surrender? Are you willing to let God be God in all the details and circumstances of your life? Are you willing to give God your dreams and desires? Are you willing to follow where He leads, even when it may cost you something?

God wants us to be honest in our praying. He wants us to be as honest as Jesus was when He prayed that the cup of suffering might be taken away from Him. He wants us to be as honest as Paul was when he pleaded with the Lord to remove his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7-8). He wants us to be as bold and honest as a blind man named

Bartimaeus who, when asked by Jesus what he wanted Jesus to do for him, simply said: “I want to see” (Mark 10:51). God wants us to pray boldly. To tell Him what we want. To ask Him anything.

And we can ask in the confidence that God will not only hear but answer the prayers of His children, though the answer we get is not always the answer we want.

Sometimes the answer is “Yes.” Sometimes the answer is “No.” Sometimes the answer is “Not now.” And sometimes, someone has said, the answer is “You’ve got to be kidding!”

Jesus prayed for the cup to be taken away. But God said “No.” For the cross was the Father’s will. It was God’s plan – for our salvation.

No, the Father would not remove the cup. Jesus was called to drink it, and to drink it alone. And Jesus accepted it. The prayer of surrender was not a prayer of passive resignation. It was a prayer of acceptance, with hope and trust. Jesus placed His hope and trust in the sovereign goodness and wisdom of God the Father. And He placed His will in submission to the will of His Father. He said: “Not my will but Yours be done.”

Because He did, we praise His name. Because He surrendered to the sovereign will of the Father, we crown Him King of our lives. Because He did not refuse to drink the cup, because He did not demand His own way, we exalt Him.

Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Dear friends, the best place in the whole world to be is in the center of God’s will, wherever that is. Sometimes God’s will leads to Golgotha. Sometimes it involves suffering. But suffering is not the last word. It was not the last word for Jesus, and it is not the last word for us.

If God’s will for your life has included suffering, let this promise found in 1 Peter 5:10 bring encouragement to your heart:

And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you, and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

May it be so in us. And may we learn to pray the prayer of surrender with sincere and trusting hearts in all the circumstances of life, remembering always that God is faithful to His promise to be with us, that He loves us with an everlasting love, and that He alone knows what is best for us and in all things works for good – His good and ours – in the lives of His children. So may the posture and prayer of our hearts always be “Not my will but Yours.” To the praise and glory of God. Amen.

