

If This Cannot Pass.....

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, let's pray as we come to Matthew 26 on page 808. Heavenly Father, we pray that your word will speak deeply into our hearts.
- We know that our spirits may be willing, but the flesh is weak. So strengthen us to know and love and serve the Lord Jesus Christ.
- And we thank you for him. In Jesus' name, Amen. Over the years I've sat with many people who are dying, mostly believers, but not always.
- Most of them, of course, don't want to die, though many are ready. Some are a bit more resigned to death than being ready. But having said that, most who are dying have relative calm, even if they're not believers sometimes, it seems to me.
- From the beginning of his adult life, at least, I would say throughout his life on earth, Jesus knew what his destiny would be.
- [1 : 1 0] Not simply that he, like us, and every person would one day die, but that he had come to die for the sins of the world. He prophesied that many times to his disciples.
- Most of the Gospels reflect that in different ways. The Son of Man has come to lay down his life as a ransom for many. I've come and the day is coming when I'll be mocked and handed over to death.
- Or I'm the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. In all sorts of ways, and at many times, Jesus anticipates his coming death.
- And always, almost always, there is a great element of calm, of acceptance, of assurance about that, about his destiny.
- Never does he shy away from it. Indeed, he rebukes Peter when Peter says, No, no, no, no, you're not coming to die. Satan, get behind me, says Jesus to Peter.
- [2 : 1 1] That's a bit earlier in Matthew chapter 16. He doesn't evade betrayal. He knows, as we saw last week, that Judas would betray him, but he doesn't escape or hide.
- Indeed, as we see today, he goes to a place that Judas would have well known and expected Jesus to be there. We saw last week, in the earlier part of this chapter, that Jesus, at that Passover meal, shakes it up when he says, Take and eat this bread.
- It is my body given for you. Drink this wine. It is my blood of the covenant shed for you. Anticipating his death with a calmness, an assurance, an element of confidence, in a way.
- But late at night, after that last meal, the last supper, as we call it, Jesus takes his 11 remaining disciples.
- They leave the upper room on Mount Zion and walk across and down into the Kidron Valley, fairly steep, but not huge, valley of a little waddy, they're called like a creek, that would dry up in dry weather, and walk up the side on the other side, which is there, the slope of the Mount of Olives.

[3 : 27] Not sure how far up, or where exactly, or how big this place of Gethsemane was. We're told it's called Gethsemane here. In John's Gospel, it's also called a garden. Gethsemane means an oil press, and there were olive trees in the garden, and no doubt hence the name to do with the oil press for making olive oil.

Probably a walled garden. There is a site these days that tourists and pilgrims go to. It may or may not be the accurate site, but it's close enough. And there Jesus goes, a place that he'd been many times before, John's Gospel tells us.

So, a place that Judas, the betrayer, could expect to find him. Jesus is not hiding away. He's not running away from death. He's facing it full on.

It's probably a quiet place, this garden. No doubt at the time of Passover, there would be many, many people in Jerusalem, and many of them would be living on the Mount of Olives, staying in hotels or guest houses, or with friends or family or in tents, because the inner city of Jerusalem would be too small to house everyone.

So, maybe this walled garden was a quiet place, even late at night, away from the bustle of people coming and going in and out of the city of Jerusalem. And there Jesus, we're told in verse 36, says to his disciples, sit here while I go over there and pray.

[4 : 54] But he doesn't immediately go alone. He takes three of his disciples with him, Peter and the two sons of Zebedee. They're James and John. It's a bit like the inner circle of the disciples. So, eight disciples are left, maybe outside or by the entrance of the garden, and three go with him.

And then those three he leaves and goes a little bit further, maybe just a couple of feet or metres or so on, further on from them. And we're told at the end of verse 37, something unusual for Jesus really.

He began to be grieved and agitated. The calmness vanishes. The language is actually very strong. Grieved and agitated.

Others translated as crushed with anguish, terrible distress and misery, the anguish of wretchedness. I am overwhelmed with sorrow.

Strong language. Jesus is not just getting a little bit nervous, like stage fright, before that final event of his life on earth. But this is something of overwhelming distress and grief and agitation and anguish.

[6 : 08] He says to the disciples in verse 38, I am deeply grieved, even to death. Strong language again.

Echoes, in effect, the psalm we said together last week as part of our National Day of Mourning observance, Psalm 42. In that translation, something like, why are you so downcast, O my soul?

That's what Jesus is saying here. He's overwhelmed with sorrow. And He urges those three disciples, Peter, James and John, stay awake with me, at the end of verse 38.

Sometimes that's translated as watch, as though they're on guard. But maybe it's simply just, be awake with me, while I pray, for moral support, encouragement, or comfort in this time.

We can see how distraught Jesus is, because as He then goes a little further, verse 39 says, He threw Himself on the ground, prostrate before God, in effect, in prayer.

[7 : 19] So this is not just simply a sit down and put your hands together and close your eyes. There is a great deal of urgency and agitation about Jesus praying here.

Now we're not simply told, like we usually are, that Jesus prayed. In other places we're told, that Jesus prayed. He went up a mountain and prayed, or He prayed.

Here we're told, what He prayed. Because we need to know, it's instructing us, teaching us, and encouraging us. What does Jesus pray?

He prays in verse 39, My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Yet not what I want, but what you want.

That's quite a profound prayer. It's an intriguing prayer. Notice that He addresses God as Father, first of all. He's actually modelling what He'd earlier taught in the Lord's Prayer, part of the Sermon on the Mount.

[8 : 24] When you pray, pray, Our Father. Here, of course, He's praying alone, My Father. He's addressing God in heaven as His heavenly Father, as indeed He was.

So He's modelling for us prayer. Secondly, He mentions a cup. Now what's He talking about? He doesn't literally have a cup with Him, presumably.

He hasn't taken a cup from the Last Supper. It's not actually really to do with the cups of the Last Supper. We talked about cups last week when He passed around the cup and said, This is my blood of the covenant.

But here probably the symbolism is a little different. Several times in the Old Testament, the imagery of a cup is used as the cup of God's wrath or anger against sin.

Perhaps most, a clearest example would be in Jeremiah, the prophet from about 600 BC. Jeremiah said, For thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it.

[9 : 36] They shall drink and stagger and go out of their minds because of the sword that I'm sending among them. And if they refuse to accept the cup from your hand to drink, then you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, You must drink.

See, I'm beginning to bring disaster on the city that is called by my name. No escape. The cup is the cup of God's wrath or punishment against sin.

And in that case, Jeremiah was prophesying the end of Jerusalem which a few years later fell, destroyed by the Babylonians. There was no evasion of that cup. That's part of the background imagery as Jesus uses the image of a cup that he must drink.

The cup is the cup of God's wrath and judgment against sin. Earlier in this same gospel in Matthew, the mother of James and John, so presumably the wife of Zebedee, had said to Jesus, Can my sons have a position in heaven to your left and to your right, the places of honour?

And Jesus said, Can you drink the cup that I must drink? Here now we come back to that imagery. No wonder you see Jesus is in anguish. He's got to drink a cup of God's wrath.

[10 : 58] From the announcement that Jesus was to be born back in Matthew chapter 1, it is clear why Jesus comes. To save his people from their sins.

Matthew 1.21. And he does that by taking upon himself the punishment for human sin. Drinking the cup of God's wrath is the image that's used here.

You see, Jesus' anguish here is not just because he's about to die. It's not an anguish about mockery or ridicule. He's not in particular anguish because he knows the trial will be a false trial.

He's not actually particularly agitated because crucifixion was fairly barbaric and painful. The real anguish came because Jesus knew that when he hung on the cross to die the next day he would be taking on himself God's wrath against the sin of the world.

Something Jesus is willing to do as an act of love for the world. What's manifold times worse than just simple crucifixion crucifixion is dying with the wrath of God on his shoulder.

[12 : 21] Jesus is facing death because of the sins of others. The only sinless man dying for the sins of the world.

We may think, well, I'm not a particularly bad or nasty person. Does this apply to me? The Bible makes it clear that our sin is whenever we fail to love God with all our heart.

We may love him lots but not with all our heart, soul and strength, all the time. And our sin is whenever we fail to love our neighbour as ourself.

We may love our neighbours a lot but whenever we fail to love any neighbour as ourself then we sin before God. the punishment for sin is death cut off from God forever.

The punishment is not a fine like a parking ticket. In such a case Jesus would have come with bags of money to pay it for us. The punishment is death and so Jesus dies for us.

[13 : 30] Nearly four years ago my unbelieving father died after many years of cancer. He died unbelieving to his last breath and despite various conversations with him in the years before he refused to think or turn to God.

He thought that death would just be the end like falling asleep never to wake up again. Comfortable a non-existence nothing.

I tried to warn him that he was living in a fool's paradise in effect that those who die with their own sins face the wrath of God and the judgment of God.

The trouble is that unbelievers in our world think well there's nothing left or that somehow if there is anything they're good enough to get there death. But Jesus' agony in the garden is a serious warning to us about the nature of death.

Death carries with it a sting that is eternal and deep and piercing unless through faith it's been removed for us.

[14 : 50] Jesus' agony in Gethsemane is a stark warning to us all. Not to treat death lightly. To make sure that we are right with God and we'll only be right with God through Jesus' agony and death on the cross.

When we die in our sins it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God. And the agony that Jesus faces here, climaxing in his statement of abandonment, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me the next day, should warn us not to take death lightly.

His agony should therefore make us who are believers even more thankful. For we realise again in the depths of Jesus' agony here that if we are believers the sting of death has been removed, our sins are forgiven, we are right with God, forgiven and acquitted and know with confidence that we will stand on the final day of judgment.

Therefore death is no longer something to fear but has become indeed the gateway to paradise and heaven for believers in Jesus Christ because he died for us.

But as we see his agony, his agitation in anticipation of dying with the sins of the world on his shoulders, death, it ought to make us even more thankful, make us realise the depths of what he went through for us.

[16 : 29] It was no light thing, no cheap salvation, not at all, a high price, not because of the pain of crucifixion, in fact the Bible never talks about the pain of crucifixion really.

It was a horrible death, yes, but the real pain and the real agony was because he carried our sins. If he didn't, he wouldn't have been agitated like he is in the garden, even if he was crucified.

That's what we saw last week with the covenant in the blood. That is by faith if we accept as Jesus passed around that cup and said drink this, this is my blood shed for you, the covenant, the new covenant, in effect he's saying you are part of God's covenant people through his blood which atones for our sins like an Old Testament sacrifice and then and only then we can have confidence in knowing almighty God.

Maybe that there are people here who are not believers, maybe you've been here a short time or a long time. I know that we should never presume that churchgoers are in their hearts believers in Jesus' death for them.

let me urge you to take seriously Jesus' agony and prayer in the garden. Let me urge you to think about facing almighty God.

[17 : 59] Let me urge you to reflect. Do you know that your sins are forgiven? Have you asked Jesus to take them on him? Have you thanked God for Jesus' death for you? But don't, please don't, think lightly of death.

For unless you're right with God through the death of Jesus, to face death would be a terrible destiny if your sins are still with you.

Jesus asks about this cup. If it is possible, take this cup away. If it is possible. Earlier in Matthew, it's declared that all things are possible with God.

Is it possible? It is possible, but it's not possible to save the world if the cup passes away.

There is no other way. Salvation is through the death of Jesus. It didn't have to be crucifixion, to be honest. It could have been any sort of death. As it turned out, it was crucifixion.

[19 : 08] The point is when Jesus died, he carried the sins, that is metaphorically drinking the cup of God's wrath. There is no other way for a person to be forgiven, no other way for salvation to anyone else, other than the perfect Son of God himself, in our place, as our substitute, taking our sins, so that we may live forever and death has lost its sting.

no other way, no other way to be right with God, no other way beyond death to have an existence with God than through the death of Jesus Christ.

Yes, it's possible that the cup would pass away, but there would be no salvation and Jesus, in fact, would have disobeyed his father as well. It's not possible to save the world except through drinking that cup.

Jesus, in expressing that personal desire, is not at odds with God the Father. He's expressing, partly I think for the benefit of us reading this and the disciples, if they were still awake at this point to hear it, he's expressing for our benefit the depths of what he went through for our benefit.

It's not an easy thing to incur the wrath of God. Jesus is in effect warning us not to go down that path of incurring God's wrath. Hand it to him.

[20 : 32] Trust him that his death deals with our sins. You see, sin must be atoned for. Sometimes people say, why can't God just forgive? Why did Jesus have to die?

It looks a bit barbaric. But if God was to simply say, Jesus, I'll take the cup away and let's forget about everybody's sins and let's all come to heaven and have a great time, it would thoroughly compromise God's morality.

He'd be saying in effect, all your failures, all your sins, big or small, in effect, they don't matter. He'd be saying that God is immoral. God is no longer perfect in his standards.

His morality and perfection, his integrity, are sustained only when due payment is made. if I was to incur a parking fine or a speeding fine or something like that, somebody came along and said, oh, look, let's just forget about the fine.

That's actually a corrupt system. If they said to you, I'll pay the fine for you, that's an act of grace. The payment is made, the system is not corrupt, standards are kept, but somebody's paid it for me.

[21 : 44] Well, of course, in the same but much more profound way, that's what Jesus has done. This matters, he says. Sin matters. That's why its penalty is death.

But I'll die for you. I'll take your sin. I'll incur the judgment, the wrath of God against sin. So the death for you no longer has a sting, but I'll endure the sting.

And that's why he's praying, so that we understand that better. And we come to him in faith. But he says, if it's possible, take this away.

That's his personal desire by way of saying, this is not an easy thing to do. He's not at odds with God the Father, he's still perfectly divine. God is not divided at this point.

Jesus, for our benefit, is expressing that personal desire. But he's saying, your will be done. If it's possible, take it away. But whatever the case, not my will, but yours be done.

[22 : 54] Jesus, again, I think, is modelling what he taught in the Lord's Prayer. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. There are, in fact, several echoes of the Lord's Prayer through this prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

My Father, he prays, your will be done, not mine. I often hear people complain that God's not answering their prayers. Well, here is God's perfect Son, who never disobeyed, who knows the will of the Father, who prays for something and it does not happen.

The cup is not taken away. It should be instructive to us if we're complaining that God's not answering our prayers. In faith and trust, he accepts God's will.

So often, I think, our prayers that we're grumbling that God is not answering are all about our will and not his. Sometimes we're too impatient for an answer, but more often just selfish.

Jesus is modelling for us as he taught in the Lord's Prayer, pray that God's will be done, not ours.

[24 : 13] And no answer is often an answer. No answer is often the answer, no, I have something better by way of an answer. The cup that you must drink is actually the right and the best thing to happen, not only for Jesus but in fact for us as well.

So Jesus is modelling as he taught, prayers that pray for God's will to be done, that actually in prayer we realign ourself into God's will.

The absence of answers of things that we may pray for selfish reason is in part rebuking us to change our desires, to align us better to the will of God.

And even facing death and incurring God's wrath and judgement, Jesus willingly submits to the will of God the Father. Well through all this as we saw in the children's talk before and as we heard in the reading, these three disciples at least doze.

In verse 40 Jesus has been praying for some time, probably an hour or thereabouts and he came to the disciples, he found them sleeping, he said to Peter, so could you, but you plural, you three, not stay awake with me one hour?

[25 : 28] Not much to ask, I know it's late at night, we've had a big meal and some wine, but could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray.

So it's not just getting them now to stay awake, but that they also should be praying and he tells them what to pray, pray that you may not come into the time of trial. Trial, temptation, same word in Greek, again an echo of the Lord's prayer.

What is the time of trial and temptation? Well as we saw last week, it is about deserting Jesus. You will all desert me, he said.

Peter said, no, no, no, no, no. You will all desert me before the cock crows, you'll deny me three times. That's the particular temptation facing them here, that they will deny Jesus and desert him.

Jesus says, the flesh, the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. A saying we often use, but use in a way completely different from how Jesus uses it here.

[26 : 31] We use it as a basic excuse for complacency. Oh yes, I wanted to do that good thing, but the spirit's willing, the flesh is weak, so I've had another chocolate cake, or I've slept in again, or I've watched more TV and I haven't read the Bible, or I've not done what I should have done.

But Jesus doesn't use it for complacency, rather he says the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak, therefore you need to pray. It's a stimulus to prayer, not an excuse for complacency.

It's precisely because our flesh is weak that we should be praying. And that's what Jesus was anticipating as we saw last week. You say you won't deny me, you say you'll not desert me, you will.

Your flesh is weak. When you're faced with the threat of your own life, when I'm on trial, the people come and quiz you about who you are and do you know me, you'll run away because your flesh is weak, you're scared.

What do you need to do? Pray. They don't pray, they fall asleep again. And they deny him and desert him. See what Jesus is implying here is that when our spirit is weak, our flesh is weak rather, we pray for strength, to resist temptation, to endure the trial, whatever it is in front of us.

[27 : 45] And these disciples don't do it. Jesus is encouraging us here about prayer. And if he, the perfect one, prayed, how much more ought we, who are imperfect and are weak, how much more should we pray to?

Jesus goes back to prayer. The disciples, as we saw for the second time, or the second time Jesus goes off to pray and he says, my father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.

There's a subtlety in the shift of Jesus' words. Firstly, he said, if it's possible, take it away, but your will be done. Now it's, well, if it's not possible, your will be done.

Not that Jesus has particularly changed his mind, but it does show that he's recognising it's not possible for this cup to pass away unless he drinks it. And now more resolutely he's praying, your will be done.

He recognises that it's not possible for the cup to be taken away. Well, despite this urgency, despite the second request, the disciples sleep again in verse 43.

[28 : 59] Jesus doesn't wake them up. He goes back for a third time to pray. He prays along the lines of what he'd already prayed and comes back after this third hour and then wakes them up. Are you still sleeping and taking your rest?

See, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going not to hide and run away. See, my betrayer is at hand.

Jesus has repeatedly prayed for the same thing. We're told the third time he prayed again what he'd earlier prayed. Sometimes we think repetition as though, you know, we've got a badger God and it seems not right.

But Jesus models for us repeated prayer. If a little child, as you walk through a store, says, oh, can I have that? And you say no.

A minute later, they've probably forgotten. But if they say, can I have that? And the next day, can I have that again? The same thing. And the next day, the same. And they repeat, you realise that they really do want that thing.

[30 : 07] Now, whether or not you buy it, it's up to you if you're a parent or grandparent. But what God wants from us is to keep on asking for what we really have as our heart's desire in our prayers.

Jesus repeatedly prays in this time. Not just once, but for three sessions of prayer. And that's what God wants from us, to keep on asking. Jesus, in fact, taught parables on this point as well.

So that we express to God our heart's desire. What our firm resolve is. So that we're not just saying to God, oh, can I have that? Can I have that? Can I have that? But by the repetition of our prayer, like Jesus here, we're expressing to God what is most important to us.

If his answer is no, then of course his will not ours be done. But this is more than about prayer. It does model prayer.

Jesus models what he taught in the Lord's prayer. And there are lessons about prayer that we should be learning here. If anything, this should be telling us to pray more.

[31 : 22] But it's also in the end, and more importantly, about Jesus. He came to die. Not just a death that is calm and peaceful in old age.

A death on his shoulders carrying the wrath of God against the sin of the world. A terrible death.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? A death that means that we can face death without its sting if our faith is placed in his.

There are many who die living in a fool's paradise. They think that death will either be paradise because they're good or there'll be nothing so it doesn't matter.

I remember my fourth form year 10 history teacher saying something fairly cynical like that. Oh, I go to church just in case there's a God, but if there's not, it doesn't matter. I'll be there anyway.

[32 : 31] That's how most people live their lives. It's foolish. It's blind. Death is a terrible thing if you're not a believer in Jesus Christ. The wrath of God is something that you will not want.

This is a warning to us, an invitation to us to place our faith in Jesus Christ. With thanks and gratitude that he took the sting so that we do not.

Thanks be to God for such a great salvation. Amen. Amen.