

# Suffering & Sovereignty

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Date: 06 March 2022

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Luke chapter 22 from verse 39. Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him.

On reaching the place he said to them, pray that you will not fall into temptation. He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me, yet not my will, but yours be done.

An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow. Why are you sleeping? he asked them.

Get up and pray, so that you will not fall into temptation. While he was still speaking, a crowd came up, and the man who was called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them.

[ 1 : 2 0 ] He approached Jesus to kiss him, but Jesus asked him, Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss? When Jesus' followers saw what was going to happen, they said, Lord, should we strike with our swords?

And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. But Jesus answered, no more of this. And he touched the man's ear and healed him.

Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the soldiers who had come for him, Am I leading a rebellion that you have come with swords and clubs?

Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour when darkness reigns.

Whether you would rather be an onion or a cake, most people are more complex than we tend to think. And many situations in our lives, there is more to them than immediately meets the eye.

[ 2 : 3 5 ] You can dig below the surface and find more of what is really going on. We have to grapple with finding out the true reality. Sometimes you peel a layer away and find that there is more to be understood.

And like an onion, it's not that you peel it away and find a layer of something completely different. You find more of the same, and yet you dig in and find a deeper reality.

And when we come to a passage like today's, we kind of have an opportunity to peel away some layers. We have an opportunity to delve deeper, to think more fully, to reflect upon the heart of our Savior.

We have in these verses an opportunity to take this familiar text, to take these events that we've heard about before, most of us, many times perhaps, to take these and to come and to understand the character of our Savior more fully, to know him better, to comprehend his actions at a deeper level than we have before.

Broadly speaking, in the first section of today's reading, with Jesus praying on the Mount of Olives, verses 39 to 46, this section shows us the suffering of our Savior.

- [ 3 : 54 ] We see more of what it cost him as we hear his prayers. Immediately following that, then the account of his arrest in verses 47 to 53, there we're going to focus on his sovereignty. So the suffering of our Savior and the sovereignty of our Savior. He suffers, and yet he is in control. He chooses the suffering.
- It is not inflicted upon him against his desires. Well, let's find out the situation. Luke, throughout his gospel, he's not particularly given to a flowery style.
- He doesn't waste words. And the account of Jesus' prayer here in the garden, Luke's account is very simply given. The other gospel writers record a kind of to and fro between solitary prayer and encouraging the disciples to be watchful, you know, to and fro a few times.
- Luke condenses down to the essentials and just notes once Jesus finding them sleeping in verse 45. Luke tells the story briefly and simply.
- [ 5 : 03 ] But when we dig below the surface of these simple words, we see here profound implications. We see the suffering of our Savior. There's a number of details, even in this short account, that point us, point us to the depth of the pain that he faces.
- Consider especially verse 42. Jesus prays, Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me.
- Yet not my will, but yours be done. Do you know what's implied in the phrase, this cup? Do you know the imagery that lies behind that?
- Let me read you a few Old Testament passages. Psalm 75. It is God who judges. He brings one down, he exalts another. In the hand of the Lord is a cup full of foaming wine mixed with spices.
- He pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs. So this cup in the Lord's hand comes in the context of God's judgment.
- [ 6 : 12 ] Verse 7, It's God who judges, and this cup is the instrument of it. And the proper recipients of that cup are the wicked of the earth. Isaiah chapter 51 cries out, Awake, awake, rise up, Jerusalem!
- You who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath. You who have drained to its dregs the goblet that makes people stagger. This is what your sovereign Lord says.
- Your God who defends his people. See, I have taken out of your hand the cup that made you stagger. From that cup, the goblet of my wrath, you will never drink again. I will put it into the hands of your tormentors.
- Do you see here this cup? It is the goblet of God's wrath. God's anger poured out. Jeremiah, This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me.
- Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. But if they refuse to take the cup from your hand and drink it, tell them, This is what the Lord Almighty says.
- [ 7 : 18 ] You must drink it. See, I am beginning to bring disaster on the city that bears my name. And will you indeed go unpunished? You will not go unpunished. For I am calling down a sword on all who live on the earth, declares the Lord Almighty.
- The same comes through again in Ezekiel 23, Zechariah 12, Lamentations 4, Habakkuk 2, this image of the cup as God's wrath poured out, as God's punishment upon the wicked, that they are forced, required to drink.
- This cup is thoroughly established as referring to punishment inflicted in the context of God's wrath. So when Jesus says, Take this cup from me, he's not just using cup as kind of a reference to any general situation.

He's not even using cup as a time of kind of difficulty and challenge. It's more specific than that. When Jesus talks about this cup, it must be a reference to the outpouring of God's own anger.

The one who drinks the cup is the one who suffers punishment from God himself. That's what Jesus knows he's heading towards.

[ 8 : 36 ] That's the cup that he does not want to drink. Doubtless there's a recognition of the physical pain that he's going to endure. That's part of his struggle here.

He knows the beating and the nails and the hours of agony as he hangs there dying. He knows the shame that will come from being tried as a common criminal.

That he'll be spat upon and mocked and tormented. That he'll hang there for hours for all to see his condemnation. Those things add to his pain.

Those things have their cost. But a greater cost, the heaviest burden, is not what he will endure from other men.

It is what he will endure from God himself, from his own father. In Revelation 14, John sees the angel who swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath.

[ 9 : 41 ] They were trampled in the winepress outside the city and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horse's bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia.

It is immense. The grapes of God's wrath that flow out into this cup that Jesus will drink.

This cup that somehow contains the blood to cover to the height of the horse's bridles for this vast area. All of it condensed into this cup that Jesus will drink.

What Jesus shies away from here in verse 42 is not the physical pain. It's not the emotional suffering of rejection from friends and community.

He prays for this cup to be taken from him because it represents God's anger poured out. Rejection from God himself. Folks, this language of the cup shows us abundantly clearly that there is an enormous price to be paid.

[ 10 : 57 ] Donald MacLeod suggests in his excellent book Christ Crucified. Folks, if you have not read this book, borrow my copy, buy a copy and read it. It is one of the top five books that I have ever read.

It is excellent. If you want to understand understand what your God has done for you, read Donald MacLeod, Christ Crucified. He suggests in it that we should see here in the garden, we should see a parallel between the trepidation of Christ contemplating this cup and Moses meeting with God on Mount Sinai back in Exodus 19.

When Moses meets with God on Mount Sinai, Hebrews 12 tells us that the sight was so terrifying that Moses said, I am trembling with fear. Moses could not cope with the enormity of the holiness of God.

The holiness of God is there made visible to Moses in cloud and lightning and quaking earth. And we've seen this in our studies in Leviticus that the weight of God's glory, his perfect holiness, can sometimes be so great as to make approach completely impossible.

The problem is God's absolute holiness that comes with destructive force. And here, here in the garden, Jesus contemplates an encounter with the terrible holiness of God and contemplates the fact that he will encounter that perfect holiness not as one who is perfectly holy himself, but will encounter that holiness as one who is bearing the sins of the world.

[ 12 : 47 ] The one who is more unclean than anyone could possibly be. The one who has taken on himself all of our shame, all of our sin, all of our rebellion, all of our rejection, all of it he has taken on himself and goes in that state to an encounter with a holy God.

And he shrinks back from the pain and the loneliness and the taste of death and from the demonic forces in play, but more than that, he shrinks back from the prospect of this rendezvous with God.

Moses trembled to go before God and to receive the law. Jesus comes ready to suffer the curse of the law.

Jesus comes expecting, knowing that he will be forsaken by God, that it will be the thunder and lightning of unmitigated divine judgment condemning sin in his tiny frail body.

And we can see, can't we? We can see how much this affects Jesus. We see that he needs a strengthening angel. We see these drops of blood, sweat, dropping to the ground.

[ 14 : 16 ] Theories about exactly what's physically happening there, in what way this is like blood, the theories abound, but I don't think it matters a great deal. What is abundantly clear here is that this experience represents what Howard Marshall calls deep psychosomatic distress.

Now, we use the word psychosomatic and it's words that are sometimes used a little bit dismissively by doctors or even more so by armchair physicians, right?

To imply that something doesn't really matter or shouldn't really be taken seriously because it's only psychosomatic. But folks, we should not think in those terms.

Mental distress is real. It's abundantly clear that that mental distress can have physical symptoms and a wide range of them. There's a sort of bidirectional link between body and mind where mental distress has a physical expression from the trembling of hands of somebody who's nervous about giving a speech through to the weeks of insomnia for somebody in considerable anguish.

On different levels, there is a link where our mind affects our bodies. On the other hand, physical means can be used to address mental situations. It's a bidirectional link.

[ 15 : 36 ] We know, don't we, how much better we feel, how much more effectively we think when we've had a good night's sleep. Chemicals have an effect on our thought processes. Our hormones affect the way that we feel and the way that we think.

And in the case of Jesus on the Mount of Olives, for Jesus here, so great is his anguish, so deep is his distress, that his sweat is like drops of blood falling to the ground.

And what I find really interesting here is that in the midst of Jesus' distress, as he is suffering this experience, as he grapples with submitting to his father's will that he clearly finds so enormously painful, his father's will from which he naturally shrinks back, in the midst of that experience, an angel comes to strengthen Jesus.

Verse 43. And what you might expect is that that would be the means of lifting Jesus out of his distress.

But no, verse 44 says, being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. The angel doesn't come and take him out of his distress.

[ 17 : 06 ] He ministers to him in the midst of it. Now, Jesus' situation is, of course, unique. Of course it is, but we can see parallels in our own experience, can't we?

Dale Ralph Davis, he says this pattern recurs in the life of God's people. That what we find is heaven's resources suddenly appear for earth's emergencies, not in order to give escape from the emergency, but rather endurance to ride it out.

This is what we find time after time. Here Jesus is given strength to withstand his suffering. The suffering isn't taken away from him. We may find the same ourselves.

Our Savior, all of this, all of this he willingly endures. He chooses it. Not because he has a death wish.

Verse 42 is very clear. He does not want to walk this road, and yet he chooses to walk this road. there's a seventh-century heresy called monothelitism, and this rears its head at various times under various guises.

- [ 18 : 22 ] Monothelitism asserts that in the incarnate Christ, in Jesus as he walked on this earth, that in him only one will is operative, not two. That's what the term means, mono, one, thelos, will, one will.

But the great ecumenical councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon, they taught and affirmed against this heresy, that in the one person of Jesus, there are two natures in perfect unity.

One divine nature, one human nature, united perfectly together in one person, and each of these natures has a will. Things that that nature desires.

Now, this is what the church has consistently taught and believed down through the ages. And this verse here, on the Mount of Olives, this is part of why.

So, part of how monothelitism arose in the first place, this heresy of just one will, part of how it arises is that from the moment of the incarnation, those two wills have been in such perfect harmony that they appear as one.

- [ 19 : 33 ] You go through the pages of the gospels, and you can't really see two different desires. You can't see two wills operative because they are so closely aligned in such perfect harmony.

Like properly operating parents who have one approach towards the children. If that's what mummy says, that's what I say. Like that, but a thousand times more closely united.

So, for instance, John 4, 34, my food, said Jesus, is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Jesus lived to do his father's will.

And yet somehow, here in the garden, here on the Mount of Olives, somehow, in the midst of this sorrow, this agony, somehow a tension arises now between a human will and a divine will.

there is something which, humanly speaking, Jesus does not want to do. So painful is it?

- [ 20 : 40 ] And so he asks for permission to set the task aside. R.C. Sproul says, the depths of that mystery is more than I can comprehend. Well, I'm glad he said it, because it's certainly more than I can comprehend.

But it's here for us, isn't it? He says, this was not sin in the sense that Jesus rejected the will of the Father. Jesus isn't in rebellion here.

He remained willing to do whatever it was that the Father willed. Rather, Jesus was not willing in the sense that he was hoping against hope that another way could be found for him to fulfill his mission in this world.

He, in his agony, on his knees asked, Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me, yet not my will but yours be done.

If another way were possible, he wished for it. And yet, given that it is not, he willingly chose to walk this path of immense suffering, the worst possible suffering.

- [ 21 : 54 ] he willingly chose to walk this path in obedience to his Father. Now, folks, if it is not sin for Jesus to say, I don't like this way, could we do it another way, please?

Yet not my will but yours be done. If it is not sinful for Jesus to say that, then insofar as we're genuinely saying the last part, yet not my will but yours be done, as long as we are genuinely saying that, then we can legitimately pray the first part.

We can pray, God, I don't like this way, is there another? And when we pray for something that is legitimately in line with God's revealed will, when we pray something that the Bible gives us reason to understand could be a valid prayer, could be an acceptable course of action, when we pray that, well, it may or may not be in line with God's ultimate purposes.

It may or may not come to pass, but it's not wrong to ask. So, so Jesus is the suffering saviour, choosing to drink the cup of God's wrath down to the very dregs, enduring not just the worst that humanity could do to him, not just the fullness of the devil's attacks, enduring rejection from God himself.

That is what he faced. Why? For the joy set before him, says Hebrews 12, 2. For the joy set before him, for your salvation and mine.

[ 23 : 42 ] The last thing to notice in this first section before we come to the arrest, notice too what Jesus says to his disciples. Yes, verse 46, we should detect a note of disappointment and frustration as he asks them, why are you sleeping?

They have not kept watch with him, as Mark and Matthew record him asking them to do. They haven't done what he wanted. He's a little bit frustrated in the midst of all his agony.

But, but look at what he says here. His first concern here still seems to be for them, doesn't it? What does he say at the start and at the end of this section?

Pray that you will not fall into temptation. Pray that you will not fall into temptation. Now, I suppose in asking them to keep watching with him, there is an implication that he hopes they will be concerned for him, that they will be praying for him.

But that's not his first priority. Even as Jesus sweats drops of blood, even as he is in anguish, as he needs the ministering care of a strengthening angel, in this moment of crisis, Jesus' request is not, pray for me.

[ 25 : 10 ] Jesus' concern is for them. They need to pray that they will not fall into temptation. Jesus knows that difficult days are coming for them. Jesus knows Satan's not going to be content to think that he's defeated Jesus on the cross and then just kind of sit back.

No, before, during, and after the cross, his followers too will know the assaults of the evil one. They must pray that they will not fall into temptation. Which of the many times of temptation these men are going to face Jesus particularly has in mind, I don't know which.

Peter in the high priest's courtyard, all of them in the heat of the arrest. The temptation not to compromise in the face of the persecutions recorded in the book of Acts.

Where the focus lies, I don't know, but the remedy is sure. The remedy is sure for them and for us. Pray that you will not fall into temptation.

temptation. And Jesus, the Savior, who hours before his own death was concerned first for his disciples, this Savior Jesus is now at the right hand of God and interceding for us.

[ 26 : 31 ] His concern continues to be for his people. the concern of our suffering Savior was obedience to the will of God and safety for his own.

Now as we come on to the second part of today's passage, more briefly than the first, as we come on to this, what's interesting to me is that though on some level Jesus does not want to do this, as we've established, yet Luke makes it abundantly clear in how he recounts these events that Jesus is going to the cross entirely voluntarily, that he does this according to plan.

Everything happens as he intended. Did you notice verse 39? Remember before all that subterfuge to hide his location when he made the plans to eat the last supper?

Well now verse 39 what does he do? He went out as usual. He follows an ordinary pattern. General onlooker certainly Judas who's been there with him. People know this is where Jesus is likely to be.

Jesus is now choosing to be entirely predictable because now is the time. He's taught his disciples the last of what he intended. He's enjoyed the Passover with them.

[ 27 : 53 ] He's pointed to the new meaning thereof. He's ready. And so now he does what people expect knowing what the results of that will be. And here comes Judas. Verse 47 approaching Jesus to kiss him.

You can feel the horror of this, can't you? With a kiss, Judas betrays him. A kiss is a slightly more common greeting between men than it would be now.

So it works as a means of identification. But as a greeting what it's meant to convey is friendship, trust, esteem, love, with a kiss.

This greeting of honor and affection corrupted, despoiled into a means of betrayal. And even in this Jesus is in control.

He knows that's Judas' intention as he comes to kiss him. He knows this is how it is to come about. But the disciples, the disciples are suddenly wide awake and fired up.

[ 29 : 04 ] They ask Jesus, verse 49, should they use force? Jesus told them before, didn't he, about carrying swords a few verses earlier. They assured him they had to. So that's where their minds go.

And Peter is not waiting for an answer. He doesn't want to lose the element of surprise, so he strikes out and cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant. There's something a bit pathetic about that, isn't there?

The man's got a sword, and what has he achieved? He's cut off one ear. But the question is not the disciples' competence as swordsmen.

This is not the way forward. Jesus' kingdom is not going to be won by the sword. He will not see these comparatively innocent bystanders wounded. Jesus heals the ear.

He's not going to win his victory in that way. It isn't about swords and clubs from Jesus' followers or from the arresting party. And in any case, as Jesus' closing remark makes very clear, in any case, this conflict isn't about these people here in this garden, per se.

[ 30 : 17 ] This is a conflict of cosmic dimensions, isn't it? This is the hour when darkness reigns. And so verse 54, they seize him and lead him away.

It looks like defeat from one angle, doesn't it? But as Luke's presented us with his accounts, well, we know there's more to it.

We know this is what Jesus has deliberately chosen. We know that he's going with them, not because they've surprised him in the middle of the night, not because they've overpowered him.

No, Jesus goes with these men, accepts this arrest, according to his free choice, delighting to obey the will of the Father for you.

God's prayer. Lord Jesus, we come wanting to thank you for what you have done, knowing that our words are utterly inadequate.

[ 31 : 42 ] that as we think on these things, there is nothing we could say or do that reflects the enormity of the pain that you endured, willingly for our sake, that recognizes, as we should, the depth of your suffering, that plumbens the depths of how unworthy we are, that spans the gulf between our sin and your perfection.

We have no words, and yet we recognize the truth in these things. We recognize that this is what you chose, and we have the means you gave us to remember these things, that we can come and we can eat the bread and drink the wine and remember what you have done for us.

we thank you for that immense privilege on every level, lost in worship of you.

Amen.