

## *Thy Will Be Done*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on February 21, 2021.

Then Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” Peter answered him, “Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.” Jesus said to him, “Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” Peter said to him, “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!” And all the disciples said the same. Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here, while I go over there and pray.” And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.” And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand” (Matthew 26:31–46).

According to plan, Jesus and his disciples celebrated their last Passover meal together, but the meal did not conclude as it began. One of the twelve would depart, not for better but betrayal. We can only imagine what the other disciples thought. In the Gospels, Judas Iscariot is identified as “Simon’s son” (John 13:2) and labeled a “thief” (John 12:6), and of course a “betrayer” (Mark 14:44). But around the table on that night, the other disciples knew him only as a fellow disciple of Jesus.

Jesus’ initial inquiry was simple enough: “Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me,” leading eleven to ask, “Is it I, Lord?”, but only one asked, “Is it I, Rabbi?” And so, he who had followed Jesus, but never truly trusted in him departed to do the devil’s bidding. Surely it set a solemn tone at the table but perhaps also established a sense of solidarity. One would betray the Lord, leaving eleven to defend him; or so they thought.

Having celebrated their last Passover and the first Eucharist, having received the bread and wine as the body and blood, having sung a hymn and then hiked up the Mount of Olives, you can imagine their marching like a band of brothers, the few, the chosen. What I can’t imagine in that moment is being told by my Lord, “You will all fall away because of me this night.” What? Doesn’t he mean “one of you fell away tonight”? Did not the betraying disciple depart at dinner? How can it be true that “all” of them will fall away? Did Jesus not say to them, “You did not choose me, but I chose you...” (John 15:16)? How can one who is chosen fall away? It’s really a matter of solidarity, isn’t it? Who will stand with Jesus, if even his disciples desert him?

Of course, what they were thinking we don't know; what Peter said we do: "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away. . . . Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" It is exactly what we expect to hear from Peter. It is exactly what we expect the others to say. It's probably what you and I would have said, maybe. We'd all stand in the gap for Jesus, wouldn't we? Boasting with bravado.

### **Boasting with Bravado**

What does Jesus mean by "You will all fall away"? Perhaps the best way to answer this is starting with what he doesn't mean. Jesus does not mean that they will cease to be his disciples. He does not mean that they will fall from grace, lose their eternal inheritance. He does not mean that their desertion renders them unregenerate. What he does mean is that on that very night every single one of them will run for their lives when Jesus willingly surrenders to those who will murder him.

In fact, Jesus says that what he prophesies was prophesied long ago: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." It is a quote from Zechariah and telling of what is shortly to come. But there is great purpose in what is prophesied.

Given the familiarity of this passage and Peter's personality, we are often tempted to see it as a revelation of his disposition. In reality, Peter is simply conveying the reality of our flesh. Often we act as if the Word of Christ is worthy of submission when it suits us, but when it goes against what we perceive to be right, we reject it or twist it to say what we want, perverting it to prove our point. Sadly, what we may perceive as devotion to Christ can be in opposition to his will. How often do we do things for Jesus that he never asked us to do? Sometimes our "Christian" causes can sound more like blustery bravado than humble submission to the will of God.

Thankfully, despite our best efforts, God's sovereign purpose was not and will not be thwarted. Despite their bravado the disciples all fled, and Peter, as Jesus said he would, denied his Lord three times before sunrise. But it was for sinners like Peter that Jesus went to the cross to die and to redeem us from sin's curse, promising "after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." And so he did, resurrecting from the dead on the third day, Jesus appeared to his disciples as he said he would. What seemed like personal, moral failure to the disciples was actually victory for all of Jesus' disciples.

How then do we avoid such self-deception? How do we keep ourselves from being obstacles to the gospel? How do we align ourselves rightly with the Lord's work, even if it seems counterintuitive or contrary to our perspective? The answer is found and the example given in Jesus' prayers for provision.

### **Praying for Provision**

Armed with confidence and resolve, the disciples go with Jesus to a familiar garden, Gethsemane, to pray. The eleven are divided into eight and three, as Peter, James, and John go deeper into the garden with Jesus. In what certainly must have seemed a contrary mood for a

## *Thy Will Be Done*

festival night, we are told that Jesus became “sorrowful and troubled,” even confessing to his closest friends, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.” It is a confession aligned with the prophet’s words: “He was... a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3). As the Son of God, he knows what awaits him; as the Son of Man, he is troubled.

In his anguish his only request of his friends is: “remain here, and watch with me,” or “stay awake with me.” Yet, as Jesus pours out his heart in prayer, those who boasted with bravado of their allegiance, are asleep within the hour. I wonder how often we are exhausted by standing up for “Christian causes” that we sleep through what is most urgent and important. Frustrated with Peter, as well as the lot, Jesus specifically commands them, “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.” If they intend to fight to the death for Jesus, can they not stay awake with him, pray with him, pray for him? They don’t. It seems their boasting was stronger than their brotherhood.

Knowing the human condition far better than any of us know ourselves, Jesus explains, “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Indeed, our spirit, meaning our willful desire, outlasts our stamina. (Ask me how I’m doing on my New Year’s resolutions.) But Jesus’ words are more than a common aphorism; they are confronting. Did not a determined Peter confidently declare, “Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away”? And now, moments later, Jesus finds him sleeping, asking, “So, could you not watch with me one hour?” Indeed, the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. Our lives in Christ must be built on something more than will power.

In contrast to Peter, consider Jesus’ example. As fully God, he knows what he will endure upon the cross, the cosmic wrath of God for sin. As fully man, he knows the shame, suffering, and death that awaits him. As the Son of God, he knows his Father’s desire. As the Son of Man, he prays for his Father’s will. Listen carefully to his petitions: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will,” and “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done,” a prayer he prays a second time. Unlike his disciples, there is not bravado in Jesus’ prayers. They are humble, trusting petitions, and they are teaching. What do they teach us?

Jesus’ prayers for provision teach us, first, that he is in vital union with his Father. What his Father wants he wants, no matter what. He actively aligns his human will with his heavenly Father’s. Second, he submits the desire of his human flesh to the eternal will of his Father. There is no other way for the salvation of the children of God but that the Son of God be crucified, and so he submits. And third, he willingly and actively embraces his Father’s will as his own, revealing total and complete trust. He will indeed drink the cup that his Father has given him, because he perfectly trusts his Father’s will.

Christian, you and I are tempted *daily* to live out the Christian life in our flesh. Of course, we are eager to think highly of our allegiance to him, but often we are sleep walking through life. Wake up and look not to your own strength but to the grace that God gives, not through the will of your spirit but his. By God’s grace, let us be in vital union with our Father through faith. By God’s grace, let us submit our desires to his, according to his Word. And by God’s grace, let us willingly embrace God’s will as our own.

## *Thy Will Be Done*

Jesus prayed earnestly for his Father's provision, and so his prayers were answered, for he became our provision in drinking the cup his Father had given him.

### **Drinking in Damnation**

Emphasizing the metaphor of drinking, Jesus prays "let this cup pass from me" and "if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." Clearly, the drink from *this cup* is at the center of his prayers, but what is it? In the Old Testament, the "cup" signifies God's will received, whether it be blessing (Ps. 16:5), salvation (Ps. 116:13), judgment (Ps. 75:8), or suffering (Lam. 4:21). Jesus expresses his willingness to receive what his Father has ordained. As the Prophet Isaiah foretold,

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed (Isaiah 53:3–5).

Indeed, our provision came in Jesus' receiving and drinking the cup.

In giving the cup, God the Father "made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). In giving the cup, our Father "loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10 NET). And in receiving the cup, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Because Jesus received the cup, "we have now been declared righteous by his blood, ...[and] saved through him from God's wrath" (Rom. 5:9 NET).

Therefore, there is no room for boasting with bravado of what we will do for Christ. Or, as Paul put it, "If I must boast, I will boast of things that show my weakness" (2 Cor. 11:30). The Christian life is not lived by boasting in what you will do for Christ but in what he has done for us. It is not a life of bravado but of submission. As we learn that God's grace is indeed sufficient and that his power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9), we too will learn to pray as our Lord did, and as he taught us to pray, "Thy will be done"!