

MAN OF SORROWS

16th February 2017

Readings: Matthew 26:36-46; Isaiah 53:1-6

Peter De Vries, was brought up in a strict Christian home but rejected his upbringing as a young man. He went on to write harsh novels about loss of faith – reflecting his own battle with God.

In one novel *The Blood of the Lamb* he tells the story of the father of an eleven-year-old girl with leukemia. After a long battle and a number of difficult treatments she begins to respond. But as she approaches remission, an infection sweeps through the ward and in her weakened condition, she dies. Her father, who'd brought in a cake with his daughter's name on it, is crushed by the news. Leaving the hospital he returns to the church where he had often prayed for her healing. Slowing as he approaches the front, he stops and looks up to the crucifix. Pausing for a time he then he hurls the cake at crucified Christ. The cake hits just beneath the crown of thorns, and brightly colored icing drips down Jesus' dejected face of stone.



In the face of suffering some shake their fist at heaven and turn their back on God. Yet others draw closer to God, find courage and are healed. What's the difference? How can we choose the right path when faced with sorrow? How do we deal with unanswered prayer?

Let's pray

In our series through the Passion of Christ we pick up the story in Matthew 26:36 (page 1040). Jesus and his disciples have finished celebrating the Passover meal, which we call The Last Supper. Judas has already slipped into the night and is organising a mob to arrest Jesus. Leaving the upper room they make their way out of Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives, toward their accommodation.

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed. Matthew 26:36–39a

Gethsemane means "olive press". And it certainly makes sense to have a press on, or near, the Mount of Olives. From John's Gospel we know Gethsemane was a garden, probably enclosed, and often used by Jesus and his disciples. Arriving at their familiar spot Jesus asks his disciples to sit together and pray. Taking Peter, James and John to another part of the garden he says, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." Going a little further Jesus falls to the ground and prays.

Now before we consider his prayer notice how Matthew describes Jesus as sorrowful and troubled. The grammar indicates this continued, even intensified, for some time. Jesus reinforces by his own words, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." Notice these words: "sorrowful", "troubled", "overwhelmed", "sorrow" (repeated) and "the point of death". These words are in marked contrast to all other descriptions of Christ. No where in any Gospel do we have a comparison. When describing this same event Luke goes so far as to say Christ's anguish was so great his sweat was like "drops of blood falling to the ground" and he could only be sustained by angelic help. This then is our question: What could possibly cause Jesus this travail, this angst, this agony?

The answer is found in his prayer, verse 39...

"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Matthew 26:39b

Jesus being sorrowful to the point of death, is all about a cup. A cup that Jesus does not want to take. What is this cup? It's the cup often referred to in the Old Testament as the cup of God's wrath. "Father, if it is possible, may the cup *of your wrath* be taken from me". What do we know about this cup? Well we have time to look up two references, the first being Jeremiah 25:15.

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. Jeremiah 25:15

Here the cup represents God's judgment on rebellious nations who refuse to repent. The cup is a powerful metaphor describing God's righteous judgment coming on the nations.

. The second verse we will look up is Isaiah 51:17

Awake, awake! Rise up, O 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 men stagger. Isaiah 51:17

Here the cup of God's wrath represents God's judgment, not on the nations, but on his people. Jerusalem, his own people will not be spared when they rebel against him and refuse to repent

From these verses, we see the cup of God's wrath represents the full fury of God's judgments on rebellious people. Notice it is his people as well as the nations. Us in the church, as well as those outside the church. This wrath is righteous and deserved. It's not inconsistent or on a whim - it is measured and considered. The nations, and we ourselves, have been warned time and time again. God's law shows him to be Holy and how we fall short. All destined to drink from the cup of God's wrath do so because it's what they deserve. None of us will escape, not one.

And the irony is that Jesus is the last person who deserves the cup. Jesus, the Son of God, the Son of Man, without sin, without fault is the only person who can stand before God's judgment and be declared innocent. He's the only person who doesn't deserve the cup of God's wrath. He's blameless, spotless, innocent.

Yet, it is the Father's will that Jesus drinks cup to its full, to the dregs, to the very last drop - the cup of God's wrath. Why? Because he drinks in our stead. In our place. Because we are sinful and God is Holy, we can never stand before him, except in judgment - and to be found guilty. Justice demands we pay the price of our rebellion yet because of God's great mercy and unfathomable love - he asks his Son to take our punishment in our place as described 700 years before by the prophet Isaiah. Listen to Isaiah 53:3

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Isaiah 53:3

This is being fulfilled in the garden and on the cross. As we look at the Passion of Christ, these last three chapters of Matthew, we are seeing the man of sorrows, rejected and despised by men. And Isaiah goes on to make it clear why he is this man of sorrows.

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Isaiah 53:4-6

So, here in the garden, at night, while his disciples slept, Jesus sees all this clearly. He sees the cup of God's wrath that he must drink. He sees the images of Isaiah 53 that he must fulfill. He sees that on the next day he will go to the cross and while hanging there die, inch by inch, draining the cup of God's wrath. And so, in the garden he prays, "Father, is there any other way? If there is, let it be". Three times he prays and three times God says, "There is no other way".

There is no other way to save you and I from God's wrath, there is no other way to be rescued. Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath so you and I could drink the cup of God's salvation. Jesus died so you and I can gather around this communion table and drink the cup, the cup of his blood, the cup of salvation.

Three times Jesus prays for the cup to be removed, three times God says no and three times he finds his disciples sleeping. Yet he faced this ordeal by himself, lonely and alone and he won. He left the garden assured, confident and in control. He'd looked at the worst that sin and death could throw at him, and he won. From this time he resolved to be obedient to his Father no matter the cost - obedient even to death.

Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!" Matthew 26:45-46.

Jesus is ready to drink the cup

And this has tremendous implications for us in a number of ways. The one I want to briefly cover is that of unanswered prayer.

In the drama of Getheseme, with the anguished prayer, betrayal by a kiss, armed mob and drawn sword we often miss that Jesus' prayer was denied. Jesus asked to be spared the cup and this was turned – down the answer was no. Now we call this unanswered prayer. We pray for a promotion at work - but are passed over. "Lord why didn't you answer my prayer". We pray for that special someone - but they spurn our affection. "Lord why didn't you answer my prayer". We pray for the health of a loved one - but they don't recover. "Lord why didn't you answer my prayer"

Now our prayers can be unanswered - we get a no - for many reasons. Often in hindsight we can see the wisdom of God in not answering our prayers the way we wanted. However, a few refusals will always remain a mystery. But let's remind ourselves that even Jesus got a "no" from God. "May this cup be taken from me" was his prayer and "no" his answer. But with this "no" we can learn. Well, in broad terms we can understand why we get a "no". And again, the answer is found in the words of Jesus.

Notice he prefaces his request with, "If it is possible". What does Jesus mean "If it is possible"? Of course, things are possible to God. Jesus himself knows there are 12 legions (70,000) angels at moment's notice. Technically Jesus request is possible but only as they fit into his plan. God's plan was to save you and I which was only possible if Jesus suffered in our place. So, for Jesus it was not possible for the cup to pass. This is reinforced by Jesus words after the request, "Yet not as I will, but as you will". "God if your will, your plan make it possible then take the cup from me."

So, when were looked overlooked for promotion it was because God has a plan, a better plan. One we can often only see when we look back. So, when we're spurned by that special person when we look back it was obvious they weren't the right person for us. God had a better plan. When some of our requests are unanswered it's not because God doesn't care, or he's too busy or can't be bothered - It's because he sees the big picture and the big picture includes our good.

So, what have seen today? We've been reminded that though many prayers are answered "yes", some are answered "no". Yes, we've even seen Jesus had unanswered prayer.

Not only this but each of us has a choice this morning. Each of has had or will have a major, heartfelt payer unanswered. We'll get the "no" - even the stony silence. When we do can be the father in the opening story whose daughter's death caused him to shake his fist and turn his back on God or we can look to Jesus, the man of sorrows, who shares our sorrow, who carries our sorrows. Jesus who knew what it is to have unanswered payer and so drunk the cup of God's wrath so you and I could drink the cup of his salvation. Glory be to his name, forever and ever amen. Let's pray