

Women's Bible Study – Winter/Spring 2010
The Heart's Cry: A Look at Heartfelt Prayer
January 27, 2010
The Heart's Cry for Obedience
Luke 22:39-44
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Welcome to our third week in our study on prayer. We began by defining prayer broadly as “the heart’s cry,” a good follow-up to our fall series on the heart of David. We live in a world of appearances, don’t we? People care about appearances. It’s a visual culture. But I find I’m constantly being drawn back to matters of the heart—what is inside, the things that people can’t see, the things that only God sees. So today we’re thinking about “the heart’s cry for obedience.”

Prayer is an intimidating topic. Jann and I were commiserating about the pitfalls of urging others on in a discipline in which we ourselves feel inadequate. This morning/evening I feel a little bit like I do after giving my son pointers in basketball. He’s played much more than I have and devotes several hours a day to improving his skills. Yet after watching him in a game, I have tips for him based on my expert observation! It’s only because he’s a nice kid that he doesn’t laugh at me outright. Some of you have had a rich prayer life for decades. Mine has been full of struggles. I’m afraid I identify much more with the disciples in today’s passage than I do with Jesus. So I come to you today not as an expert in prayer. Not even as someone who is satisfied with my progress in prayer. I’m a fellow student, anticipating with you what the Holy Spirit will do in our hearts when we ask him to teach us.

Let’s look at today’s Scripture passage. If you have your Bibles, open them to Luke 22. Luke is the third book of the New Testament. We’ll start in verse 39: And he [Jesus] came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. And when he came to the place, he said to them, “Pray that you may not enter into temptation.” And he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, and knelt down and prayed, saying, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.” And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. And when he rose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow, and he said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation” (ESV).

With our time today I’d like to highlight a few things about this passage specifically, then make 3 points about praying for obedience, and finally, tell you a story.

We break into the story of Jesus’ last days on earth here in verse 39. Judas has already plotted to betray Jesus, Jesus has shared the Passover with his disciples and foretold Peter’s denial. Now Jesus and the disciples head to the Mount of Olives, which was about 300 yards from the temple, across the Kidron Valley. In verse 40 Luke refers to “the place,” assuming that his readers would know this was the Garden of Gethsemane, on the western slope of the Mount of Olives. Gethsemane means “oil press,” denoting a garden in an olive grove, where olive oil was prepared. Jesus gave the 11 one specific instruction: “Pray that you may not enter into temptation.” He goes just a little ways away—they probably could still have seen him and maybe even heard him. And this is the climactic moment of Jesus’ prayer life as a man on earth. A man with a fully human nature and a fully human

body. I think this is one of the most heart-wrenching prayers in the Bible: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me."

The word "Father" here is the everyday Aramaic term that both children and adults would have used for their earthly fathers. It conveys both warmth and reverence, both intimacy and acknowledgement of authority. The idea of God as father is found throughout the Bible. I love how God created family relationships to portray spiritual realities. Husbands are compared to Christ in the way they are to be the loving heads over their wives. Wives are compared to the church in the way they are to submit to and respect their husbands. Older believers are compared to parents in the way they are to teach and train younger believers. And here we see a believer's relationship with God as Father. Most of us can relate to this. And even if you didn't have a great model in your own home, we all have a pretty good idea of what a loving father is like, and we are drawn to that. So if you have unfulfilled longings for an earthly father who prompts respect, reverence, and love, you can take comfort in knowing that your heavenly Father is perfect in all these ways. We can approach him in prayer this way.

Jesus makes two requests of his Father in his prayer. The first request is that he not have to drink the cup. What cup is he talking about? The cup is a metaphor for God's wrath. Jesus knew he was about to face one of the most gruesome methods of torture and death ever devised. He had seen floggings and crucifixions before, had seen the agonizing, slow death and public humiliation, and his human nature did not want to go through that. But even more terrible than the physical horror, Jesus faced the pain of bearing the sins of the world and, thus, his Father's anger. Isaiah 51 speaks of "you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath . . ." (17) God tells Jeremiah: "Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath . . ." (15). Throughout the prophets, God's wrath is symbolized by a cup that a person is forced to drink. By his sacrifice on the cross, Jesus bore God's wrath so that we would not have to. But first Jesus cries out to his father, "If it's possible, take this cup of suffering and death—this cup of your wrath—away. I don't want to drink it!" Jesus expresses this idea in John 12 when he says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. . . Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour" (23-27). I think of this request to remove the cup of suffering as illustrating the intimacy that Christ had with his Father and that we can have with God when we are his children.

But close on the heels of the first request is the second: "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done." I think of this request as illustrating the authority of the Father, and Jesus' willing submission to that authority. Jesus was not forced to submit to his Father. He willingly chose to do his Father's will. He says in John 10, "I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father" (17-18).

Prompted by my ever-questioning 12-year-old, I submit to you a few difficult questions. 1) Isn't God's will always done? Why ask that it be so? This is a great question. To answer it, it's important to carefully define what we mean by "God's will." I'm going to use two categories that many theologians use as well. There are different names for these categories sometimes, but the idea is the same. First, there's God's will of command, or his moral will. This includes all the standards in the Bible, including the 10 commandments. You and I know that the 10 commandments are broken

every day, so in this sense God's will is not always done. God says, "Do not covet." I covet. Is it God's will that I covet? No. It's God's will that I be holy, so I am not doing God's will when I covet. The second category is God's will of decree, or his providential government of all things. These include "all the events of history that God has ordained to come about" (Grudem, Wayne. Systematic Theology.) as in Isaiah 46:10: "My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do." But God sometimes uses the sins of men to bring about his plan. For example, though it was a sin to kill the Son of God, God ordained that Christ would be crucified. We have to have a category in our minds that can acknowledge that sometimes God wills that which he abhors. How does this matter when we pray? Well, praying that God's will be done is always an excellent starting point, because the purpose of prayer, remember, is not to get God to do what we want, but to align our wills with his. It acknowledges his right to command our obedience. We are asking that his will be done in us—that he work his sanctifying work in our hearts—and in the world, even through the sinful acts that pervade a fallen world.

2.) If Jesus was God and God cannot sin, how can Jesus' temptation to disobey have been real? If you want a thorough discussion of this question, I refer you to Wayne Grudem's excellent tome, Systematic Theology. For now, I will try to briefly summarize. Jesus was fully human, like Adam, but he was also fully God. Jesus' human nature never existed apart from union with his divine nature, so in that sense he was different from Adam, who fell, and from us. But the Bible says Jesus' temptations were indeed real and that he "in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). How can this be? Consider Jesus' temptation to turn stones into bread. In his divine nature, he could have performed that miracle. But he didn't. Even though he possessed a divine nature, Jesus would never use his divine nature to help him resist temptation. Even though in his divine nature, he couldn't have sinned, he didn't use that as "a crutch" to help him get through a temptation. One might argue, too, that only those who successfully resist temptation have felt the full force of it. We all know that it is easy to give in immediately. It is the hardest to resist fully until the temptation has passed. Jesus fully faced and fully resisted every temptation to sin that he experienced in his life. He is the only man to ever do that, which is why the shedding of his blood could reverse the effects of Adam's sin. This is also why we can only resist sin with his help and the new nature he has given us. But we CAN resist with his help, *because* he has given us a new nature.

Next notice that an angel appears from heaven, strengthening Jesus. Luke is the only one of the gospel writers to record this detail. I find this sentence intriguing. There is no elaboration here, just that one statement. But it's significant that the angel could have rescued Jesus, but he didn't. He strengthened him. We, in our trials and temptations, are not left alone either. We have the Holy Spirit in us and the fellowship of other believers to strengthen us when the way *out* of a difficult situation may very well be the way *through*.

Verse 44 gives another curious detail—"Being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood." The word "like" might mean we are to take this as a metaphor, but there actually is a condition called hematidrosis, where great stress causes capillaries to burst, and a person can actually sweat blood. The point Luke is making is that Christ's agony was intense; therefore, he redoubled his efforts in prayer.

Finally Jesus finishes praying, only to find his disciples sleeping, Luke says, "for sorrow." In parallel passages in Matthew and Mark, Jesus says, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Our spirits often have great intentions, but our physical desires often get in the way, don't they—especially when we are tired or sad. This is one reason it's so important to pray for one another, especially

those who are unable to pray for themselves. The disciples, like me, don't really "get it"—that the stakes are so high—and they give in to sleep at a crucial time in their lives. Jesus repeats the instruction he first gave them: "Pray that you may not enter into temptation," bringing the account full circle.

So, here are 3 observations about prayer and obedience.

1. Obedience is a battle and prayer is the primary weapon. Jesus is very clear on this point. He says, "Pray." Why? "So that you won't enter into temptation." Prayer is what helps us fight against sin. And who is this battle against? Paul says (Eph. 6) we fight against "the schemes of the devil . . . We do not wrestle against flesh and blood . . . but against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Then he goes on to list the elements of our armor—the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, and so on. Because our enemy is supernatural, we need a supernatural weapon. How do we get this armor? God supplies it all, chiefly through prayer. Hear the end of this passage: "And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication" (18).

There are definitely strategies that we can employ that help us in our struggle against sin—strategies that help us obey. I've invited you to discuss these in your small groups today, and I hope you can share helpful ideas with one another. We all should know where, with whom and when we are most vulnerable to temptations and avoid those situations or those people. The Bible says, "Flee youthful passions" (II Tim. 2:22). Be skilled at running away. Be accountable to someone. You might need to get rid of your internet connection or your cable package or your credit card. All these strategies might be good and necessary. But our primary focus today is on prayer. You can do all those things, but without prayer, you will fail, sooner or later.

We can't do what God requires and shun what God forbids without his help. We can't do it on our own. It's so easy to think we can handle things if we just make enough resolutions, read enough self-help books and employ all the principles we find in them. If we strengthen our willpower, follow some rules, or attend our support group, then we can conquer our worst selves. We think that if we fail, we just need to try harder or find a new program that will work for us.

Our family has been listening to a sermon series by Bob Glenn on the Sermon on the Mount lately. There, in Matthew 5 Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." This righteousness is Christ's—a perfect and comprehensive righteousness, the kind we can never achieve on our own. That beatitude pictures those who "hunger and thirst" as helpless people who are starving. What do starving people do? They beg. And that's what the prayer of obedience is for us—begging for Christ's righteousness.

2. Obedience comes when we've cultivated a life of devotion to prayer. Notice the phrase in verse 39: "as was his custom." Intense times of private prayer were Jesus' custom. Prayer was not crisis mode. It was customary mode. We saw this last week in the life of Daniel, too. Paul says we are to be "devoted to prayer." Luke says, "Always pray and don't lose heart" (18:1). There are those spontaneous, "Lord, help me!" prayers, but if that's all you do, I don't think that's a life that's devoted to prayer. There are prayers at meals, and prayers as you drift off to sleep, prayers with your small group today, and prayers with your kids at bedtime. All are good, but, again, if that's all your prayer life consists of, I don't think that's a life of cultivated devotion to prayer. We need a

balance of spontaneous, throughout-the-day prayer and consistent, intense times of more lengthy conversation with God.

Every temptation or trial is an opportunity to sin or to obey. When I've spent years cultivating consistent times of intense prayer, I've had lots of practice in bending my will to God's. Then when I'm faced with a choice to obey or disobey, I'm much more likely to obey. A life of consistent, intense devotion to prayer is even more crucial when you consider that you make most of life's choices without even thinking about them. You just react. When my husband says something I disagree with, I don't think, "Hmm. I could be sweet or I could roll my eyes in this situation. I think I'll roll my eyes." No. Stuff just comes out of your heart. Whatever you've been cultivating in there just spills out.

Jesus always found time to pray. If he needed this intimate, regular communication with the Father, how much more do we! He prayed at his baptism (Lk 3:21); before he was tempted by Satan (4:1-15); he withdrew to pray before healing people (5:16); he prayed all night before choosing the disciples (6:12); he was praying during the Transfiguration (9:28).

If this kind of prayer is not part of your regular experience, here are some ideas for growing in this area. Since we all make time for the things that are most important to us, schedule a regular time and place. Start with 5 minutes once a week if the thought of more than that is daunting to you. Remember, the goal is to actually BEGIN this practice! Use a journal to help you focus, otherwise, if you're like me, your mind will be elsewhere really quick. Pray through a chapter of the Bible, or use a book like The Valley of Vision, which is a collection of Puritan prayers. Use an acronym like ACTS (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication) or begin by praying for your own soul and then move out in concentric circles praying for family, friends, colleagues, and on out to the nations. There are many resources available in the bookstore and online to give you ideas and motivation.

3. The rewards of praying the prayer for obedience are great. What did Christ gain through his obedience? He knew there was something greater ahead: "Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 12:2). Some of the results and rewards for obedience are known to us and stated clearly in Scripture. Others we don't know about until later, so we obey as an act of faith in the trustworthiness of God—that he will be and do for us all that he says he will, and that he is infinitely better than the temporary pleasures of sin.

Conversely, the consequences of NOT praying the prayer for obedience are serious. Hebrews urges us to "Exhort one another every day . . . that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (3:13). Hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. I don't want to be that. But I will be that if I am prayerless. I can't keep from sin if I never pray for a heart of obedience.

Recently I've watched someone drink a cup of suffering and trial that she did not want to drink. I watched her cry out for a heart of obedience, and I watched God answer her prayer, so I want to share what I've learned. My father-in-law retired from a joyful but stressful 20-year pastorate in Fairbanks, Alaska, about 2 ½ years ago. The intense cold and darkness combined with a very needy congregation made him and my mother-in-law long for a slower-paced, less stressful, more part-time ministry down in the lower 48 closer to family. So they moved to southern Illinois, where Rich's dad's mother still lived. They hadn't been there long before they realized that grandma needed care. They stepped in and began providing it. And over the next 2 years they would see Grandma decline

dramatically. She lost her physical independence rapidly, and, as her dementia worsened, she grew more and more difficult to live with. Before long she couldn't be left alone, even for a few minutes, so Mom and Dad gave up most of the activities they enjoyed, and they took turns going to church. They had retired and moved south to escape the stress of a full time pastorate and to enjoy their grandchildren. They had never owned a home and had looked forward to buying a place of their own. Instead they were suddenly under more stress than they ever had been, they couldn't visit their grandchildren, and they were living in Grandma's tiny old farmhouse, dealing with medical and psychological issues they were completely unprepared for. The lion's share of the nursing care fell to my mother-in-law Judy. I found it so ironic because over the years Mom had said repeatedly to us, "When I get too old to live alone, put me in a nursing home. I could never care for someone like that, so I don't expect you to." And now she was doing it. She learned how to handle Grandma's constant criticism and irrational desires. She learned how to empty a foley bag and clean and insert a catheter, how to organize and administer a complicated meds regimen. She found music Grandma would enjoy and cooked food she could tolerate. She read her books, and, in the end, fed her by hand.

Grandma died peacefully at home on January 12, her daughter-in-law and son by her side. Mom told me that she knew that God had them retire at precisely the time they did, not to relax, but to take on an even more challenging ministry. But it's one thing to know what God wants you to do, and another to actually do it. A few days ago I asked her how she found the strength to obey—to drink a cup she never wanted to drink, to essentially give up 2 years of her life. Without hesitation she said, "I fought the battle in prayer every single day. I went to bed praying, I woke up praying. I said, 'Lord, I don't want to do this, but you were human, too, so you understand, and you won't give me more than I can handle.'" She told me about the specific sins she fought against in prayer—there was a discouragement (Lord, no one cares what I'm doing); there was pride (Lord, I have a college degree. Why am I cleaning bathroom messes?); there was bitterness (why aren't other relatives doing their share?); there was impatience (Lord, when will you take her home? When will you take ME home?).

She didn't only pray her honest feelings, she prayed these Scriptures constantly throughout the day. She posted them in the kitchen and at the bathroom mirror and over the washing machine:
"For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised" (Heb. 10:36).
"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18).
"[The Lord] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'" (II Cor. 12:9).
"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

If Christ had not obeyed, there would be no gospel. We would all be utterly lost and condemned by our sin. But because he did obey, he enables us to obey, too, not on our own, but by the power he gives us when we ask him in prayer.

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