

Gethsemane: Lessons from Jesus in the garden of tears

It is said that the true stature of a person is measured in the hour of trial. How we face suffering certainly reveals the depths of our mind and soul. And it is in Gethsemane that we see Jesus reach one of the peaks of His life: His attitudes, His reactions and His prayer to the Father constitute a true model for us in the dark night of trial. If in the “pulpit of the cross” Jesus left us [“The Seven Words”](#), **in Gethsemane** He also bequeathed us **a memorable sermon of eternal validity**.

Those long hours of agony leave us a picture full of lights and shadows, **emotions of death** and **life lessons**. The fight is fierce and the contrasts are constant. We are facing an event of great emotional and spiritual intensity. The failed prayer of the apostles and the fervent prayer of Jesus frame a situation with which, in a sense, we all identify. There was only one Gethsemane in history, unrepeatable, but each believer will go through their “little Gethsemane” in their life, situations of trial, temptation and danger when decisive battles for our faith are fought.

1. Emotions of death

«My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death» (Mark 14:34 NIV).

As we consider how Jesus dealt with His atrocious death, we are struck first of all by His emotions. The night before His martyrdom was long, very long. The events that lie ahead plunge Him into a state of deep anguish. It was going to become night also in His soul. Why?

It wasn't just fear of a physically and psychologically cruel death. The darkness on that night lay in a deeper level. An intense spiritual battle was to be fought. Not only His physical and emotional courage was going to be tested, but also His full acceptance and submission to the will of His Father. The very reason for His life was at stake. The decisive hour had come.

Blood, sweat and tears: the dark night of the soul

«And being in anguish, He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground» (Luke 22:44 NIV).

Jesus' own description of His feelings is deeply moving: «He took Peter, James and John along with Him, and He began to be deeply distressed and troubled. “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death”, He said to them.

“Stay here and keep watch.” (Mark 14:33-34 NIV).

The original text (see also Matt. 26:37-40) reveals a growing emotional intensity from anxiety to death sadness. In the words of the scholar Edersheim: “Increasingly, with every step forward, He became ‘sorrowful’, ‘full of sorrow’, ‘sore amazed’, and ‘desolate’”¹. This last word seems to indicate extreme loneliness, abandonment and desolation.

Luke, from his medical knowledge, gives us a meaningful detail of the ominous moment: «And being in anguish, He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground». Medicine explains that, in a state of very intense stress, the blood can come out of the small vessels, the capillaries, and produce micro hemorrhages like drops. Jesus' sweat mixed with blood marks the climax of that night of «fervent cries and tears» (Heb. 5:7 NIV) and reveals to us with poignant rawness the intensity of the struggle He was sustaining.

A deep understanding of these emotions of death cannot leave anyone indifferent. It leads us to cry and love Jesus with deep gratitude.

2. Life lessons

In that night of pain, however, there were not only *unique emotions*, there were also *memorable lessons*. Great tests usually bring forth great lessons because God is a specialist in transforming our adversities into opportunities.

As we pointed out at the beginning, in Gethsemane Jesus gave us a memorable sermon. As on the Cross, it was a message of few words, based mostly on His attitudes and His reactions, on what He did and what He avoided doing. The luminous character of Jesus shines brightly in Gethsemane. What a great contrast between the darkness of that night and the radiant light of His Person!

We see two lessons that derive from two prayers: the failed prayer of the apostles and the prayer of Jesus, a model of acceptance of the will of the Father.

A failed Prayer: Lesson of understanding others

«He went back to the disciples and found them asleep...» (Luke 22:45 NIV).

Jesus greatly needed prayer during that long night; it was a vital weapon in a context of fierce spiritual struggle. For this reason He seeks the support of three beloved disciples, who had already accompanied Him in other special situations, and begs them: «Stay here and keep watch with Me» (Matt. 26:38 NIV).

¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Book V, CHAPTER XII. GETHSEMANE.

He asks for something apparently simple: company and prayer. Jesus, as a man, needed to feel the closeness and support of loved ones in the hour of trial. However, the disciples -overcome by fatigue- fall asleep and not only once, but three times! (Matt. 26:44-45). His own have failed Him again; Judas had betrayed Him just a few hours before, Peter was going to deny Him soon and in between another experience of frustration and loneliness at the most necessary moment coming from those He trusted the most.

How does Jesus react? At no time do we see Him irritated by the weakness of His own, blaming or scolding them for their repeated inability to keep watch with Him in this critical hour. All of us in similar circumstances would have been driven by anger. Far from it, the Master responds with words of understanding and not reproach: «Couldn't you men keep watch with Me for one hour?... The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak» (Matt. 26:40-41 NIV).

What a masterful lesson in empathy! Jesus was aware of the fatigue of the apostles due to the intensity of the previous hours, so dense and full of events. He understands that they are emotionally and physically exhausted. Jesus does not focus on His own need -to feel supported- but on their weakness and need.

In Gethsemane, Jesus shows great **strength** (in the face of trial) and great **understanding** (towards the apostles) at the same time. We already knew both virtues through His ministry. What is unique here is that both are expressed in moments of supreme tribulation, at the edge of torture. No circumstance, no person, nothing and no one was able to alter His love and kindness. Certainly, of Christ it can be said that He was «slow to anger and great in mercy» (Ps. 145:8 NKJV).

A model prayer: Lesson of submission

«He fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from Him» (Mark 14:35 NIV).

We could learn the first lesson from the failed prayer of the apostles, now the prayer of Jesus leaves us with another memorable lesson, an example of submission and acceptance of the will of the Father.

It is a model prayer for its content and for its form. We discover in it a magnified echo of our own spiritual struggles and it stimulates us to imitate the Master in our “little Gethsemane”. Jesus needed to come to accept the impending torture. Acceptance however, is not something automatic; genuine acceptance is a hard process with several steps:

- **Struggle.** «“Abba, Father”, He said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from Me”» (Mark 14:36 NIV). Jesus fights in prayer because as a man He has the same reaction as any of us: He tries to avoid that physical and

moral torment, He seeks to change things. It is the legitimate and natural stage of struggle in the face of any suffering. The apostle Paul also earnestly prayed that God would remove his thorn (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

- **Fervent intensity.** «*With fervent cries and tears*». The author of Hebrews describes, almost with crude realism, the emotional intensity of Jesus' prayerful struggle with the Father: «During the days of Jesus' life on earth, He offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverent submission» (Heb. 5:7 NIV).
- **Full disposition to obedience.** «*Yet not my will, but yours be done*» (Luke 22:42 NIV). It is important to note how Jesus ends his prayer: «Yet not as I will, but as you will» (Matt. 26:39 NIV). The struggle to change things and the fervent prayer about it must always come framed by submission to the will of God, however mysterious it may seem at first.

Christ's submission to the will of the Father was total from the beginning of His life on Earth. The hymn of Philippians 2 describes it for us in these words: «...He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!» (Phil. 2:8 NIV).

A necessary response: provision of new strength

The cry and tears of Jesus did not go unanswered. The Father saw His pain and heard His cry. At first glance we are surprised by the statement that Jesus «was heard because of His reverent submission» (Heb. 5:7 NIV). In what sense was He heard? God did not spare Him from death. Christ had to go through the bitter pill of the cross.

From our human perspective, “being heard” should imply an affirmative response to His request, that is, deliver Him from the cross. But we know that this was not the case. God heard Him in the sense that He sent an angel from Heaven to strengthen Him. In Luke's story, the cause-and-effect relationship between Jesus' request -«Father, if you are willing, take this cup from Me»- and the Father's immediate response: «**An angel from Heaven appeared to Him and strengthened Him**» (Luke 22:42-43 NIV) becomes very evident.

Let us also observe the moment in which this occurs. According to Luke, it was just before sweating drops of blood, that is, when the suffering was maximum and the spiritual combat fierce, at the limit of His strength, Jesus receives what He most needs, new strength. What a great lesson: God does not always deliver us from the test, but He will always give us the right resources at the right time to face it (1 Cor. 10:13).

Christ emerged victorious from the fight in Gethsemane. Hours later He triumphed on the Cross. His victory provides us with the grace that saves and strengthens us in the weakness of our “little Gethsemanes”. Therefore, «let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need» (Heb. 4:16 NIV).

Prayer: *Lord, thank you so much because that dark night in Gethsemane you did not hide your face, but rather you set it like flint. Thank you for your courage, your self-giving and your mercy, because you did it for us. Our hearts swell with gratitude in the face of so much suffering and so much love. Thank you for the cross. We ask you, Lord, to help us love you more every day. And at the same time help us to face our trials as you did. Amen.*

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The web **Christian Thought** gives information about the literary work of Dr. Pablo Martínez and his father Rev. José M. Martínez. Through this work the Christian thought of the authors flows covering a wide range of subjects; theological, psychological and ethical issues are considered from a biblical perspective with a relevant and practical application to current problems.

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