

Growing on our Prayerful Dependence upon God

Matthew 26:36-46

I wonder whether you have ever had the feeling
that everyone else is doing wonderfully;
and that while everyone else has shiny lives;
your life is feeling like a bit of a struggle.

We can start to feel this at Christmas time with the arrival of Christmas Cards
and the annual Christmas letter from all our acquaintances.
The wonderful achievements of all our friends and their families
are laid out for us to digest,
and perhaps we are left wondering why we ourselves
have failed to scale to the same heights.

This feeling can only be worsened
by what we see on social media platforms like Facebook.
I know one single friend of mine who finds the end of January very difficult
because it's then that all her friends post pictures
of their smiling children returning back to school for the year;
it's another reminder of what she feels is missing from her life.

But we would do well to remember that when it comes to the success of others,
the images that are presented to us might not necessarily be the truth.

A survey conducted by HTC (the telecommunications company) has shown
that two thirds of social media users admit to posting images to their profiles
to make their lives seem more adventurous;
6% have borrowed items to include in photos, passing them off as their own.

I'm not sure that anyone has borrowed child to pass off as their own,
but you never know!
The drive to sell a successful picture can be very strong, cant it?
But as the research has shown us,
how others choose to present themselves
is hardly ever an accurate picture of the truth.

By way of contrast, what we have in today's Bible reading
is a very honest account of human weakness.
Matthew's portrayal of Jesus praying in the Garden
would probably not be the kind of thing posted on social media
or included in his annual Christmas letter.
Here we have presented before us a picture of human weakness
as a trembling and sorrow-filled Jesus
fails to receive the support of his tired and unreliable friends.

This is week number four in our series entitled *Growing more like Jesus*,
A series asking the question,
“If our goal is to grow more like Jesus each and every day,
then what kind of person are we aiming to be? What was Jesus like?”
And here we see a Jesus who was frail,
but whose frailty led him to become *prayerfully dependent upon God*.
To be like Jesus is to be a person who prays,
a person who recognizes their weakness but sees within that weakness
an opportunity to call upon the power of God.

Do you want to experience the power of God in your life?
Well it starts with recognizing the weaknesses that we each carry,
weaknesses which lead us to seek out God’s strength.
And in our passage I see two ways in which, like us,
Christ was dependent upon his heavenly Father.

As we enter into the Garden of Gethsemane
we do so with a savior who knows he’s about to die.
The last supper has finished where Jesus had identified Judas as his betrayer,
And now he is waiting for his arrest; it’s the beginning of the end.

With him are his disciples and he shares with three of them
a very intimate detail in v38: My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow
to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.

Like us, Jesus knew what it was like to be intensely sad.
He’s not just a little bit upset,
he says that his soul is overwhelmed with sorrow.
This is the first aspect of human weakness that led Jesus to pray;
His sorrow brought him to his knees.

The word that’s used behind our English translation here
is the same word that’s used when Herod discovers that he he’s been tricked
into executing John the Baptist;
A word describing the emotions associated with a very traumatic event,
perhaps an event we might only ever experience once or twice in a lifetime.

It’s a sorrow which overwhelms Jesus to the point of death –
I don’t know whether you’ve ever been so sad that life loses its appeal,
where you wish for nothing more than to sink into the ground.
A bit like how Job felt if you remember our sermon series from a couple of
months back, in his grief he certainly didn’t feel like life was preferable to
death. That’s the kind of feeling that Jesus describes here.

It’s an emotion that seems to heighten within Jesus a feeling of being isolated;

Stay here and keep watch with me, He asks his disciples.
Sorrow has all sorts of different effects on those who are experiencing it.
Some want to withdraw, some want to reach out to others,
both reactions express the weakness we feel when sorrow moves in;
either we are no longer able to meet with others
or we are longer able to cope without others.
In this particular case Jesus seemed to desire the support of his friends,
that's the effect that sorrow has brought upon him.

So Jesus understands what it feels like to be drowning in sorrow,
He understands how deep this feeling can run,
he understands how it can effect how we relate with others.

Of course the root cause of these feelings can vary from person to person,
and from season to season.

Many of us will feel the sorrow of grief and loss.
The sorrow of loosing a loved one,
The grief of loosing our health and strength,
the sorrow of missing out on an opportunity,
the sorrow of unfulfilled dreams and wishes.

For some of us sorrow can take on a chronic form
with diseases like depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

For Jesus, the sorrow he was experiencing was of yet another sort.
In verse 39 we hear Jesus praying "My Father, if it is possible,
may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."
What was it that was moving Jesus so deeply?
It was *the cup* that he was about to drink from.

The cup is an OT image used to describe God's judgment upon sin.
When God brought calamity upon sinful nations
he was described as forcing them to drink from the cup of his wrath.

Jesus is fully aware of what was going to be achieved on the cross,
for on the cross he would bear God's anger and judgment for human sin;
on our behalf he would be offered and he would drink the cup of God's wrath.

So what is this sorrow that he feels?
The way Jesus describes it,
it's the sorrow at feeling the weight of God's displeasure,
the sorrow of knowing that our sins have removed us from God's favour.
You know the sadness you feel
when you know you've let down someone you love?
When you've proven yourself to be unreliable,
or uncaring, or completely selfish in a relationship,

and then you realize the damage you've caused.
This is the sadness that our sins ought to provoke within us.

This kind of sorrow is a delicate thing,
because too little may mean we are ignorant of our sins,
but too much may mean we haven't really grasped
how Christ has received God's judgment on our behalf.

So it's a remarkable section of the gospels this one,
Because we see Jesus in all his humanity.
Truly God, and very truly human,
to the point of knowing the sadness that comes with recognizing human sin.

And what does he do in the face of this weakness? He prays.
Three times he prays in response to his frailty,
And we'll speak about the nature of this prayer in a minute,
but I just want to mention the other aspect of human fragility here.
We see it mentioned in v 41 Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.
Jesus knows the realities of *sorrow*,
and he also knows the reality of *temptation*:
the second aspect of weakness that led Christ to pray.

Matthew's Gospel is the one that chronicles the temptation of Jesus most thoroughly,
and the big temptation for him was to back down from God's plan.
This was the temptation brought to him by the Devil in Ch 4,
it was the temptation brought again by Peter in Ch 16.

And backing down is something that the disciples need to watch too.
Immediately before this scene in the Garden of Gethsemane,
Jesus speaks about how his followers will be scattered,
and how Peter will disown him.
This is the great danger of the hour, and it's an ongoing danger, isn't it:
the danger of choosing an easier life rather than sticking with Christ.

The reality of the human condition
is that we can be compromised people who have conflicting desires.
The spirit is willing but the body is weak is how Jesus puts it.
We can desire to honour God with our actions,
but the pull to do otherwise is also very strong,
and so temptation is a very real and constant weakness that we must battle.

And how do we wage that battle? Jesus tells us to pray.

We might be able to think of some *alternatives* to prayer
as a way of dealing with our human fragility.

One alternative might be found in seeking to out-muscle our weakness.

I noticed just this week the Black Dog institute, which is an organization dedicated to research about mental health, they've launched a campaign called *Headgear*, which is aimed at helping men maintain and look after their mental health. The idea is that they provide exercises that their research has developed. The slogan for this campaign? *Toughen up your nut!* It looks like a noble idea, it looks like it could be really useful, and certainly part of the common grace is that God gives all humanity includes the work conducted by places like the Black Dog Institute.

But I do have some reservations about the slogan –
mental health need not be a problem if you can manage to *toughen up*.
When things are really bad that kind of slogan might not do much to help.

We get the same basic approach of helping ourselves in some other religions,
Apparently Buddha said “peace come from within, do not seek it without”.
So again the way forward with personal turmoil is to do the work yourself.
This is fine if you have some strength remaining,
not so good if you feel you are already spent.

On the other end of the spectrum,
it is possible to offer zero resistance,
allowing human weakness to have its way with us.
This approach I feel is embodied by the disciples' behavior in vs 43-45
⁴³When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. ⁴⁵Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners.

At the moment when they should have been at their most alert,
the moment when the greatest temptation to give in was about to descend,
the disciples allow themselves to be overcome by their own feeble humanity.

There are those who make the decision to go through their *whole lives* lying down,
You may have come across some people for whom
defeat and hopelessness have become big part of their identity;
the very real weaknesses that they experience have become entrenched.

So I think neither extreme is what we are aiming for:
We don't want to roll over and give in,
but the answer isn't always found in our own strength.

This is why the approach exemplified by Jesus is so helpful.
In his weakness he recognizes a positive action that he can take:
He can call upon the God who loves to offer his children help.

In fact, one of the themes developed by Matthew as he talks about prayer is this idea that prayer is often driven by our infirmities. and the second half of the Lord's prayer is all about our neediness as humans. Give us today our daily bread – a prayer about our physical needs Forgive us our sins - prayer about our spiritual need Lead us not into temptation – like the lesson he offers us in ch 26.

Our spiritual neediness is also a theme in Ch 9, where Jesus looks out upon the crowds who have come to hear him preach, and we are told that he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. His response is to tell his disciples to pray "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

And God really wants to hear from us and he really wants to respond.

"Which of you, Jesus asks in Matthew 7 if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? ¹¹ If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

Matthew's observation is that prayer and human need go hand in hand, and that God himself is ready to meet us in our neediness.

The reason it's like this is because this way the glory shines back on God himself. When God answers prayer it demonstrates that he is greater than the power we have to save ourselves and also that he's greater than the power the world has to keep us down.

I remember a friend of mine from university was diagnosed with a very aggressive cancer one December. For some weeks his voice had started to give way and we all thought it was laryngitis or stress, but then they discovered a tumor in his upper chest that was pressing on a nerve leading to his voice box. And the tumor was really growing. One night he woke up gasping for breath because it had started to crush his windpipe. Inoperable, so they attacked it with radiation therapy, and he asked all his Christian friends to pray. And the tumor shrunk, and then it disappeared, and he's still with us 10 years later. I believe it was God working through the gift of modern medicine that saved him. The following May he held a thanksgiving service, and I remember saying to him. "This could have been you're funeral." The doctors call people like that super responders, but I think it's more due to the fact that we were praying to a super God.

It's not an experience that anyone wants to go through, but here was the benefit of my friend's experience with human weakness. It offered us an opportunity to enter into what I've heard old timers call a *concert of prayer*. Just like an orchestra is made of many instruments playing along to the same tune, so to a concert of prayer is when many Christians pull together to pray for the one outcome, and the result can

be breathtaking. Inoperable cancer cured, certain disasters averted, men and women saved from hell, the opportunity to see God's power at work in incredible ways. Why don't we join in together? Let's all pray for each of these prayer points here on the back of the bulletin this week. God's power just might surprise us as, like Jesus, we start to depend fully upon him.

I'll lead us in prayer right now.