



# Central Peninsula Church

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## How to Stay Faithful in the Darkest Hour

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

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The spiritual life is full of seeming paradoxes. One of them is that the stronger you grow in Christ, the weaker you feel; and the more susceptible you feel to temptation. Thomas á Kempis, a great a man of God, often wrote about being worn down by the steady assault of sin. He once prayed, "This is what often distresses me and shames me in your sight; that I am so apt to fall; so weak in resisting my passions. Even though I don't give way to them altogether, the way they keep on me all the time is very irksome and distressing; I get sick and tired of living day in, day out, at war with myself."

Thomas á Kempis speaks for all of us. Whether you're a homemaker, a university student, a young professional or a retired senior, you and I find ourselves caught in the crossfire of temptation. And God uses these things to refine us. One of the interesting things about the NT is that the same Greek word can be translated either "test" or "tempt." So the very same thing can at the same time be temptation or a test. God doesn't lead us into temptation, but he does test us. The enemy uses something to tempt us in order to get us to fall, while the Lord uses the same experience to test us in order to us refine and strengthen us.

The story is told of a young man named who prayed to the Lord to take away all his passions. When he thought he had become immune to temptations, he strode in to visit one of the elders of his church, confidence dripping from his voice: "You see before you a man who is completely at rest and has no more temptations."

The elder replied, "Go and pray to the Lord to command some struggle to be stirred up in you, for the soul is matured only in battles." The young man was humbled. And when the temptations started up again he didn't pray that the struggle be taken away from him, but only said: "Lord, give me the strength to get through the fight."

The question is, when we're in the fight, how do we survive it? How can the very thing that the enemy would use to "sift us like wheat" actually become that which God uses to "refine us like gold"? The answer is found in Jesus' experience in the garden of Gethsemene. Turn with me to Luke 22:36-49.

**"And He said to them, 'But now, whoever has a money belt is to take it along, likewise also a bag, and whoever has no sword is to sell his coat and buy one. For I tell you that this which**

**is written must be fulfilled in Me, "AND HE WAS NUMBERED WITH TRANSGRESSORS"; for that which refers to Me has its fulfillment.' They said, 'Lord, look, here are two swords.' And He said to them, 'It is enough.' And He came out and proceeded as was His custom to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples also followed Him. When He arrived at 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 He knelt down and began to pray, saying, 'Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done.' Now an angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him. And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground. When He rose from prayer, He came to the disciples and found them sleeping from sorrow, and said to them, 'Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not enter into temptation.' While He was still speaking, behold, a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was preceding them; and he approached Jesus to kiss Him. But Jesus said to him, 'Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?' When those who were around Him saw what was going to happen, they said, 'Lord, shall we strike with the sword?'"**

### **I. Jesus intentionally withdrew with his disciples for prayer.**

When I read these verses I feel like I am barging into the "holy of holies." You want to enter this scene with a kind of reverence. Jesus has just finished with the Last Supper. He proceeds with his eleven disciples out of Jerusalem to the Mt. of Olives, where he had been spending his evenings for the past week. It's significant that he goes to the customary place because it tells us he was willing to be found. Judas, who had already left, would know exactly where to find him with the chief priests and temple guard in tow. For Jesus, it wasn't the time to hide.

But before his arrest, we see here that he would spend time talking to his Father. Both Matthew and Mark also describe this scene. Luke's portrayal of it is much briefer than the others. His disciples are there with him,

but his focus is on Jesus. Jesus brings his disciples along with him, but then he withdraws from them, deeper into the garden. The word means that he tore himself away from them, like it wasn't easy. He falls on his knees and he begins to pray.

There seems to be an intentionality to what Jesus does here. He didn't just come to the garden and decide to pray as an afterthought. The fact is, Jesus was intentional about praying throughout his life. In this gospel alone, we've seen him praying at his baptism. We've seen him praying all night before he chose the Twelve. We've see him praying at his transfiguration. Luke has told us in that **“he would often slip away to the wilderness to pray”** (5:16). And it was because his prayer life was so attractive that his disciples asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray.” They didn't ask him to teach them to preach, study or heal. It was natural to ask him how to pray because that's what stood out in his life.

But now we have an entirely new situation. He's in a time of deep emotional distress. Up until now, it's seemed that he's been absolutely fearless. Luke told us in chapter nine that “he resolutely set his face to go to Jerusalem,” knowing full well what would happen there. Up until now, he seemed completely in control. But here in the garden, there is a change. He's overwhelmed with a sense of dread and fear.

This is a time of testing and temptation for Jesus. How would he endure it? How would he stay faithful? Well, he would pray. *Staying faithful depends on staying prayerful.* And he shows us we have to be intentional about this. We have to tear ourselves away from whatever it is we want to hold on to, or whatever it is that might distract us for just one more minute. We have to find a place to be alone and we have to pour our heart out to the Father. I've found that this kind of prayer doesn't happen by accident; you have to choose to do it. I've also found that there are always several things working against this choice. There are always other things to do, even good and necessary things, and there is something in me that would much rather do those things than pray. It's like a husband and wife who've been married for ten years and have three kids under the age of eight. Is it easy for them to get away and spend time together alone? Goodness no! But is it important? Absolutely! So we have carve out time for prayer to survive.

## **II. Jesus commanded his disciples to pray preventively.**

Notice also that Jesus commands his disciples to pray. This would be an hour of trial for them as

well. So Jesus says, “Pray that you might not enter into temptation.” When he tells them to pray, he uses a word that means to pray continuously. It's not a one time thing because the possibility of temptation is not a one time thing. It's interesting to note that in the upper room Jesus told them that he had prayed for them because Satan had demanded permission to sift them like wheat. But now we see that they can't rely entirely on his prayers for them; they have to pray too. It's wonderful to have people praying for us, but we need to pray as well, and we need to pray for ourselves.

What does Jesus mean to not enter into temptation? He means that in the hour of trial, they wouldn't succumb to the pressure to forsake him. They wouldn't lose their faith in him. They wouldn't fall away from being his devoted followers. That the whole experience they were about to go through wouldn't do them in spiritually. And I believe he says this knowing full well that they would all fail him; they would all scatter; and Peter would even deny him three times. I think in retrospect they would think back on this and learn from it all. “You know, guys, we didn't really do what he said. We didn't pray like he told us to.”

One of things Jesus is teaching not only them but us here is that we're vulnerable and weak. Apart from God's help, we WILL enter into temptation. We have a cunning spiritual foe named Satan who is always scheming up ways to bring us down. We have a sinful nature that is always looking for ways to gratify itself apart from God. And we live in world where the current of sin is so strong it's a miracle we all don't get swept away! There is no way we can survive spiritually amidst all the things that we're up against. So *staying faithful depends on staying prayerful that we enter not into temptation.*

## **III. Jesus surrendered his desire to God's will in prayer.**

Of course, Jesus is the model for this very thing. As we'll see in moment, while he's praying, they're sleeping. Let's take a look at his prayer in v.42. Notice a number of things. He starts out, “Father...” He knows that God is his Father and he comes to him with that in mind. He taught us to do the same thing. When you come to him, come to him as you would come to a loving, faithful father. It's Father's Day. Father's Day is great. I get pampered all day. I get to watch the US Open and be waited on hand and foot! But that's not really what being a father is all about. Being a father is about being there for your kids, protecting them, providing for them and teaching them. Here the Son comes to the Father with a request that would have gone straight to the Father's heart because it's the role of the Father to protect and Jesus needs protection. By the way, this gives us a powerful glimpse into the love of God...for US! He loved us so much that he was willing to let his Son go through this! He loved us so much he was willing to say no

to his Son's desire to somehow escape from being separated from him. He said no to his Son's request to be saved so he could save you!

Notice also that he recognized his Father's power to do so. He says, "If you are willing, remove this cup..." Jesus believed that if his Father was willing, he really could remove this cup. He never for one moment believed that things really were out control. Maybe God wasn't sovereign. Maybe the enemy had the upper hand. As fathers, we would like to think we're almighty, but were not. But our Heavenly Father is!

And notice how he was honest about his desire. He wants this "cup" to be removed. What did he mean by that? Some people think Jesus was just afraid to die. That wasn't the thing he feared at all. In the OT, the wrath of God against sin was sometimes referred to by the metaphor of a cup (Ps 11:6). What he feared was being the object of his Father's wrath. He was about to drink a cup that would separate him from his Father for the first time in eternity. You know how small children sometimes have this thing we call "separation anxiety?" That moment of separation from mom or dad, whether it be for five minutes or five hours, convulses the child. Jesus was dealing with something similar, but far more profound. The Father was about to turn his back on the Son in judgment. All the sin and filth of the world would be carried by him.

Jesus didn't want to go through with it, and he was honest about that, but in the end he surrendered to God's will rather than demanding his own: "yet not my will, but yours be done." And he really meant it. He said this with utter sincerity. These weren't just a few pious words he tacked on to the end of his prayer for effect. He wanted to do God's will.

*Staying faithful depends on staying prayerful.* Jesus teaches us we can be totally honest with God. We can tell him what's on our heart. We can ask him for anything. Think of it this way: he knows what you feel; he knows what you want; he knows what you fear, so why try to hide it?

But in our honesty, we should also be surrendered. At least in spirit, every prayer should end, "yet not my will, but yours be done." Prayer IS surrender. If I throw out a boat hook from a boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer isn't pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to God's.

What are the areas of your life right now where you're being totally honest with God, but still surrendering your will to his? Maybe you're a single man or woman who wants so much to fall in love and find a life's partner. Maybe you're a high school athlete who wants so bad to play at the next level. Maybe you're a young couple who wants so bad to have children of your own. It doesn't matter what it is, tell God about it, but determine that you'll also let him decide what's best for you.

#### **IV. Jesus received strength from an angel in prayer.**

And the amazing thing is, when we do that, he helps us. Verse 43 says an angel from heaven appeared to him, strengthening him. Matthew tells us the same thing happened after he was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days (Mt.4:11). What strikes me here is that though his friends failed him, God still provided a source of strength in an angel. So often we find our strength and encouragement in people, and we should because often times that's how God works. But there are times in life, times of trial, when it seems you don't have a friend in the world. Or the friends you have just don't get it. In those times, God will provide another source of strength.

It also strikes me that Jesus received supernatural strength AFTER he surrendered in prayer. It's almost like this wouldn't have happened unless he said those words, "not my will, but yours be done." And I believe he received strength specifically to carry out the Father's will.

So often we think that the point of prayer is to change God. We want to get God to do something he may be reluctant to do, like a kid trying to talk his mom into a candy bar at the grocery counter. But I'm convinced that prayer changes us more than it changes God. Not only does his will becomes our will, but even better, his strength becomes our strength. So we're not left to our own devices to gut it out. *Staying faithful depends on staying prayerful* because through prayer you'll receive the strength to stay faithful.

#### **V. Jesus continued to agonize in prayer.**

What is strange is that his intense emotional strain didn't let up after surrendering to God and receiving his strength. Verse 44 says he was in agony and he was praying fervently and he even sweat drops of blood. This went on for some time. You would think that once he surrendered and was strengthened, the ordeal would be over. But sometimes it doesn't work that way. John White says, "Storms do not let up simply because the helmsman decides to maintain course.... Let it not dismay you then that in the fiercest storms of life the wind and waves should continue to buffet you long after you've said, 'Not my will, but yours be done.' The storm will not last forever but neither will it let up the moment you set your course."

That was true with Jesus. He continued to agonize for some time. This is an aspect of prayer that we don't don't talk about enough. When was the last time you agonized in prayer? This is the only time this word "agony" is found in the entire NT and apparently it was a word borrowed from the Greek athletic world. It pictures the agony of an athlete in the 26th mile of a

marathon, struggling and striving to cross the finish line. How different from our view of prayer. So often we think prayer should not be about agony, but ecstasy. That there should be this enraptured conversation between me and God, like two lovers reunited after months apart. Instead, Jesus gives us a model for prayer that includes sweat and blood; a kind of holy striving.

Have you ever prayed like this? *Staying faithful depends not just on on staying prayerful*, but on being diligent in prayer; on working in prayer. Let me challenge you to do something this week: spend one full hour in prayer. For some of you, that will be easy. You've done it many times. For others, that will be very difficult and will seem like agonizing work. But do it. Don't do it during your morning commute. Don't do it when you say grace. Shut the TV off. Shut the radio off. Don't even read your Bible. Just pray for one hour. Next week I'll ask you how it went.

## **VI. Jesus rebuked his disciples for sleeping instead of praying.**

Oh, and something we learn from the disciples, don't do it while you're lying in bed! We see here that Jesus rose from prayer, went to his disciples, and found them snoring. Luke says they were "sleeping from sorrow." What a curious statement! Our physical being is so tied to our emotional being. It was beginning to register with the disciples what was about to happen, and it exhausted them, and so instead of praying they slept. Jesus prayed and he got strength. They failed to pray and they fell asleep. And it wasn't okay. They should have fought it. They should have stayed awake. Jesus says, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not enter into temptation." Same words as before.

If we're going to stay faithful, we need to stay awake. What does that mean? It means to be spiritually alert; to be prayerful and ready when temptation strikes. That's what Jesus was doing, but the disciples didn't think they needed to do that.

Many of us recall the movie *Titanic*. Why did that great ocean liner go down? Some might say it was an iceberg, but I would say it was the failure of the Captain to stay alert; to keep watch, to have an attitude that something could happen at any time that could bring the ship down. But he and the others in charge were so confident in that ship that they failed to stay alert.

*Staying faithful depends on staying awake and prayerful!* You and I fall asleep when we stop praying because we fail to realize that we're in the

midst of a trial. We sleep when we fail to see that the enemy is cunning and we can fall at any time apart from the strength God provides through prayer.

## **CONCLUSION**

I tried to think of the mindset God wants us to have from this whole scene. It's kind of like if you learned this week that an imminent terrorist threat was coming upon the SF Peninsula this week. What would you do? Well, every day you would stay alert. Every day you would be so careful about what you did and where you went. Every day you would pray like crazy for protection and wisdom. You probably wouldn't even fall asleep.

In a sense, that's how Jesus teaches us how to live. We do face a spiritual terrorist attack every day; one that could undermine our faith; one that is carefully planned by a cunning enemy. If we're going to survive, we have to stay alert and we have to pray every day for protection and for wisdom. *Staying faithful depends on staying prayerful.*

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