

XII. THE GETHSEMANE PRAYER

The cup! the cup! the cup! Our Lord did not use many words: but He used His few words again and again, till this cup! and Thy will!--Thy will be done, and this cup--was all His prayer. "The cup! The cup! The cup!" cried Christ: first on His feet: and then on His knees: and then on His face. . . . "Lord, teach us to pray!"--Alexander Whyte, D.D.

We come to Gethsamane. What a contrast! The sacerdotal prayer had been one of intense feelings of universal grasp, and of world-wide and illimitable sympathy and solicitude for His church. Perfect calmness and perfect poise reigned. Majestic He was and simple and free from passion or disquiet. The Royal Intercessor and Advocate for others, His petitions are like princely edicts, judicial and authoritative. How changed now! In Gethsemane He seems to have entered another region, and becomes another man. His sacerdotal prayer, so exquisite in its tranquil flow, so unruffled in its strong, deep current, is like the sun, moving in meridian, unsullied glory, brightening, vitalising, ennobling and blessing everything. The Gethsemane prayer is that same sun declining in the west, plunged into an ocean of storm and cloud, storm-covered, storm-eclipsed with gloom, darkness and terror on every side.

The prayer in Gethsemane is exceptional in every way. The super-incumbent load of the world's sin is upon Him. The lowest point of His depression has been reached. The bitterest cup of all, His bitter cup, is being pressed to His lips. The weakness of all His weaknesses, the sorrow of all His sorrows, the agony of all His agonies are now upon Him. The flesh is giving out with its fainting and trembling pulsations, like the trickling of His heart's blood. His enemies have thus far triumphed. Hell is in a jubilee and bad men are joining in the hellish carnival.

Gethsemane was Satan's hour, Satan's power, and Satan's darkness. It was the hour of massing all of Satan's forces for a final, last conflict Jesus had said, "The prince of this world cometh and findeth nothing in me." The conflict for earth's mastery is before Him. The spirit led and drove Him into the stern conflict and severe temptation of the wilderness. But His Comforter, His Leader and His inspiration through His matchless history, seems to have left Him now. "He began to be sorrowful and very heavy," and we hear Him under this great pressure exclaiming, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death." The depression, conflict and agony had gone to the very core of His spirit, and had sunk Him to the very verge of death. "Sore amazed" He was.

Surprise and awe depress His soul. "Very heavy" was the hour of hell's midnight which fell upon His spirit. Very heavy was this hour when all the sins of all the world, of every man, of all men, fell upon His immaculate soul, with all their stain and all their guilt.

He cannot abide the presence of His chosen friends. They cannot enter into the depths and demands of this fearful hour. His trusted and set watchers were asleep. His Father's face is hid. His Father's approving voice is silent. The Holy Spirit, who had been with Him in all the trying hours of His life, seems to have withdrawn from the scene. Alone He must drink the cup, alone He must tread the winepress of God's fierce wrath and of Satan's power and darkness, and of man's envy, cruelty and vindictiveness. The scene is well described by Luke:

"And he came out and went, as he was wont, to the Mount of Olives: and his disciples also followed him.

"And when he was at the place, he said unto them, Pray that ye enter not into temptation.

"And he was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down and prayed.

"Saying, Father, if thou be willing remove this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done.

"And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him.

"And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

"And when he rose up from prayer, and was come to his disciples, he found them sleeping for sorrow.

"And said unto them, Why sleep ye? Rise and pray, lest ye enter into temptation."

The prayer agony of Gethsemane crowns Calvary with glory and while the prayers offered by Christ on the cross are the union of weakness and strength, of deepest agony and desolation, accompanied with sweetest calm, divinest submission and implicit confidence.

Nowhere in prophet or priest, king or ruler, of synagogue or church, does the ministry of prayer assume such marvels of variety, power and fragrance as in the life of Jesus Christ. It is the aroma of God's sweetest spices, aflame with God's glory, and consumed by God's will.

We find in this Gethsemane prayer that which we find nowhere else in the praying of Christ. "O, my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." This is different from the whole tenor and trend of His praying and doing. How different from His sacerdotal prayer! "Father, I will," is the law and life of that prayer. In His last directions for prayer, He makes our will the measure and condition of prayer. "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you," He said to the Syrophenician woman, "Great is thy faith! Be it unto thee as thou wilt."

But in Gethsemane His praying was against the declared will of God. The pressure was so heavy upon Him, the cup was so bitter, the burden was so strange and intolerable, that the flesh cried out for relief. Prostrate, sinking, sorrowful unto death, He sought to be relieved from that which seemed too heavy to bear. He prayed, however, not in revolt against God's will, but in submission to that will, and yet to change God's plan and to alter God's purposes He prayed. Pressed by the weakness of the flesh, and by the powers of hell in all their dire, hellish malignity and might, Jesus was on this one only occasion constrained to pray against the will of God. He did it, though, with great wariness and pious caution. He did it with declared and inviolable submission to God's will. But this was exceptional.

Simple submission to God's will is not the highest attitude of the soul to God. Submission may be seeming, induced by conditions, nothing but

all enforced surrender, not cheerful but grudging, only a temporary expedient, a fitful resolve. When the occasion or calamity which called it forth is removed, the will returns to its old ways and to its old self.

Jesus Christ prayed always with this one exception in conformity with the will of God. He was one with God's plan, and one with God's will. To pray in conformity with God's will was the life and law of Christ. The same was law of His praying. Conformity, to live one with God, is a far higher and diviner life than to live simply in submission to God. To pray in conformity--together with God--is a far higher and diviner way to pray than mere submission. At its best state, submission is non-rebellion, an acquiescence, which is good, but not the highest. The most powerful form of praying is positive, aggressive, mightily outgoing and creative. It molds things, changes things and brings things to pass.

Conformity means to "stand perfect and complete in all the will of God." It means to delight to do God's will, to run with eagerness and ardour to carry out His plans. Conformity to God's will involves submission, patient, loving, sweet submission. But submission in itself falls short of and does not include conformity. We may be submissive but not conformed. We may accept results against which we have warred, and even be resigned to them.

Conformity means to be one with God, both in result and in processes. Submission may be one with God in the end. Conformity is one with God in the beginning, and the end. Jesus had conformity, absolute and perfect, to God's will, and by that He prayed. This was the single point where there was a drawing back from God's processes, extorted by insupportable pain, fear and weariness. His submission was abject, loyal and confiding, as His conformity had been constant and perfect. Conformity is the only true submission, the most loyal, the sweetest and the fullest.

Gethsemane has its lessons of humble supplications as Jesus knelt alone in the garden. Of burdened prostration, as He fell on His face, of intense agony, of distressing dread, of hesitancy and shrinking back, of crying out for relief--yet amid it all of cordial submission to God, accompanied with a singleness of purpose for His glory.

Satan will have for each of us his hour and power of darkness and for each of us the bitter cup and the fearful spirit of gloom.

We can pray against God's will, as Moses did, to enter the Promised Land; as Paul did about the thorn in the flesh; as David did for his doomed child; as Hezekiah did to live. We must pray against God's will three times when the stroke is the heaviest, the sorrow is the keenest, and the grief is the deepest. We may lie prostrate all night, as David did, through the hours of darkness. We may pray for hours, as Jesus did, and in the darkness of many nights, not measuring the hours by the clock, nor the nights by the calendar. It must all be, however, the prayer of submission.

When sorrow and the night and desolation of Gethsemane fall in heaviest gloom on us, we ought to submit patiently and tearfully, if need be, but sweetly and resignedly, without tremour, or doubt, to the cup pressed by a Father's hand to our lips. "Not my will, but thine, be done," our broken hearts shall say. In God's own way, mysterious to us,

that cup has in its bitterest dregs, as it had for the Son of God, the gem and gold of perfection. We are to be put into the crucible to be refined. Christ was made perfect in Gethsemane, not by the prayer, but by the suffering. "For it became him to make the captain of their salvation perfect through suffering." The cup could not pass because the suffering must go on and yield its fruit of perfection. Through many an hour of darkness and of hell's power, through many a sore conflict with the prince of this world, by drinking many a bitter cup, we are to be made perfect. To cry out against the terrific and searching flame of the crucible of a Father's painful processes is natural and is no sin, if there be perfect acquiescence in the answer to our prayer, perfect submission to God's will, and perfect devotion to His glory.

If our hearts are true to God, we may plead with Him about His way, and seek relief from His painful processes. But the fierce fire of the crucible and the agonising victim with His agonising and submissive prayer, is not the normal and highest form of majestic and all-commanding prayer. We can cry out in the crucible, and can cry out against the flame which purifies and perfects us. God allows this, hears this, and answers this, not by taking us out of the crucible, nor by mitigating the fierceness of the flame, but by sending more than an angel to strengthen us. And yet crying out thus, with full submission, does not answer the real high, world-wide, royal and eternity-reaching behests of prayer.

The prayer of submission must not be so used as to vitiate or substitute the higher and mightier prayer of faith. Nor must it be so stressed as to break down importunate and prevailing prayer, which would be to disarm prayer of its efficiency and disown its glorious results and would be to encourage listless, sentimental and feeble praying.

We are ever ready to excuse our lack of earnest and toilsome praying, by a fancied and delusive view of submission. We often end praying just where we ought to begin. We quit praying when God waits and is waiting for us to really pray. We are deterred by obstacles from praying, or we succumb to difficulties, and call it submission to God's will. A world of beggarly faith, of spiritual laziness, and of half-heartedness in prayer, are covered under the high and pious name of submission. To have no plan but to seek God's plan and carry it out, is of the essence and inspiration of Christly praying. This is far more than putting in a clause of submission. Jesus did this once in seeking to change the purpose of God, but all His other praying was the output of being perfectly at one with the plans and purposes of God. It is after this order we pray when we abide in Him and when His word abides in us. Then we ask what we will and it is done. It is then our prayers fashion and create things. Our wills then become God's will and His will becomes ours. The two become one, and there is not a note of discord.

"And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us." And if we know that He hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him. And then it proves true: "And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight."

What restraint, forbearance, self-denial, and loyalty to duty to God, and what deference to the Old Testament Scriptures are in that

statement of our Lord: "Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?"