

IS THIS GOD’S WILL?

Luke 22:39–53

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Jesus’ agony in Gethsemane and His subsequent arrest while there.

“Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed Him. On reaching the place, he said to them, ‘Pray that you will not fall into temptation.’ He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, ‘Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.’ An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow. ‘Why are you sleeping?’ he asked them. ‘Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.’ While he was still speaking a crowd came up, and the man who was called Judas, one of the Twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him, but Jesus asked him, ‘Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?’ When Jesus’ followers saw what was going to happen, they said, ‘Lord, should we strike with our swords?’ And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. But Jesus answered, ‘No more of this!’ And he touched the man’s ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the elders, who had come for him, ‘Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs? Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour—when darkness reigns’” (Luke 22:39–53, NIV).

If you are familiar with the account of the other Gospels about Jesus’ experience in Gethsemane, you notice that Luke’s account of the Lord’s Gethsemane experience is much shorter. It’s as

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though we're reading a condensed version. Luke does not give us the name of the place, Gethsemane, other than just to simply say He went out to a place at the Mount of Olives. Gethsemane itself means "olive press," since, in that area of the slope of the Mount of Olives, it was filled then—as it is now—with olive trees. And the olives were simply gathered and put into a stone press and a great stone was rolled over them to crush them and the olive oil came out, which was a very precious, necessary food commodity at the time. Gethsemane—olive press—was to be that kind of experience for the Lord that evening.

The other Gospels also tell us that Jesus took with Him Peter, James, and John, more privately, and began to be very sorrowful. He invited them especially to be near Him at this time. The other Gospels also reflect that the disciples fell asleep on three different occasions. Each time, the Lord came to them and found them sleeping.

A question might be asked: Why does Luke leave that out? We don't really know. But I would suggest that Luke, who is the longest Gospel of the four, perhaps looked at the scroll that he was working with and saw—like you do when you're writing a letter and you have four pages of stationary available and you've already used three and there's a whole lot more yet to write—and he says, "I've got to cut somewhere," and the Holy Spirit allows him to do some condensing, so that he can have the time he feels he ought to spend on the account of the Resurrection. That's the only good guess I have. I think the Holy Spirit can work in that process, as He obviously did. Luke does tell us some things that the other Gospel writers don't. Especially Luke shows us the intensity of the spiritual struggle that the Lord faced. For example, that an angel strengthened Him. Luke alone tells us that. You might look at that and say, "That's not fair. When I'm going through a trial, no angel comes along to strengthen me." But then none of us have ever had a trial

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like the Lord had, laying down our life as substitution for other people's sins. So I think it's ok that He had special help.

Then He had a special agony. Luke, the medical doctor, is concerned about His perspiration and the fact that, in His agony, He sweat drops that were as blood—pink-like in color, falling down to the ground. He had a condition that is not unknown to medical science. It has occurred at various times under unique and rare stress and pressure. The breaking up of subcutaneous or capillaries below the skin. And that flowing out as bloody sweat. The Lord knew agony.

Luke also is the only Gospel writer who tells us that Jesus restored healing to the ear of the slave of the high priest. The other Gospels simply tell us it was cut off. But Luke, again the doctor, is concerned to let us know, before the chart is filed away, that that thing got better. A good doctor. Also, letting us know that Jesus is very careful to not open Himself to any impeachment charge that He advocated political rebellion.

With that background out of the way, we want to look at the theme of how we take this Scripture and put it to work in our own life. My theme today is stated in the form of a question, "Is This God's Will?" The reason why I ask that is, there are times in my own life when I ask, "Is this God's will?" Maybe you have a time like that, when what is happening to you seems really out of God's will. I'm not sure that I have the intellectual breadth to dive in deep to the whole subject of God's will. But I would simply suggest, in looking at this text, that there is certainly behavior that is present that God does not approve. God does not want any of us to be a betrayer. The Lord does not want any of us to come with armed force and arrest and escort an innocent victim away. And when the Lord Himself asks us to stay awake and pray, He would be pleased if we could do that and not fall asleep. A lot of things that evening were happening around Jesus that were

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actions that were not in God's highest will. They were in God's permitted will but they were not in God's highest will.

What do you do when things like that are happening in your own life? When people around you and circumstances around you and events around you all seem to add up to "How could God be in this? That was wrong. I was embezzled here, or done in here. God, how could You let that come together the way it did?" We look at those kinds of moments in life and say, "Lord, out of all this, what's Your will? Is this Your will?"

I suggest to you, through this message today, that when everything seems to be out of God's will in your life, you don't have to be out of God's will. You can be in God's will and stay in God's will, even though everything around you seems to be breaking out of His will. That's exactly where we find Jesus in Gethsemane. Things around Him—certainly God does not approve the kind of behavior involved. But Jesus is struggling to remain in, to do the will of God.

I'm going to suggest five things that Jesus did as a model for us, as an example for us so that we can imitate Him when we come to struggles—maybe you're not into struggles today of any kind, I think that's wonderful, just wait a few months or a few years and you'll get in one. Take notes in your Bible and file this away. Put a thing on the fly of your Bible that says "struggle," and put the page number on there so you can go back to it. But if you're in it, hopefully this will be helpful spiritual medicine for your soul today.

I. One of the great things Jesus did right off the bat to show us how to go through times like this—when we're asking, how can this be God's will?—is that He takes people near Him into His confidence.

He shares His inner life with others. Mark and Matthew both tell us that "He took with Him Peter, James and John and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And to say 'My soul is

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[the literal Greek] banded about with sorrows.” I’ve heard older women talk about the days of corsets, where you literally had to put your foot against it to get it tight. That’s the idea of this verb. Jesus is being corseted in. He’s being girdled in, banded in. He says, “I am absolutely constrained with sorrow. I feel so bad. It’s wrapped all around Me and it’s tightening on me.” I submit to you that Jesus didn’t have to do that kind of thing. He could have taken the attitude, “I’m the brave Son of God. I don’t want to let anybody see that this is really heavy on Me.” He obviously has some physical manifestation, even that something’s going wrong. Mark says that He began to be greatly distressed and troubled. That is, in a non-verbal way. He was done in in those moments physically, perhaps shaking. Then verbally saying, “I’m heavy.” As the Lord, He didn’t say, “I am the Lord here. I’m the Messiah. I’m the Son of God and the Son of God doesn’t talk about His anxiety and being banded about with sorrows, because the Son of God is supposed to say everything is ok. ‘How are You, Jesus, in Gethsemane?’ ‘I’m fine, thank you.’” Isn’t it a liberating thing to know that the Lord Himself didn’t try to put up a front? When He was down, He was down. He trusted the people who were closest to Him and said, “I hurt. I’m going through something. Can you help me? Stay with me and pray for a while.” Luke puts the emphasis on the fact that Jesus told them to pray for their own sake. The other Gospels add to that that He wanted them to watch with Him.

Somehow, I got the idea that the Christian life was one where you buck up and tough it out. You don’t ever talk about your needs or your inner soul’s struggles. I’m not suggesting that we go around in life like a basset hound with our ears on the ground and our face mopey and down. You don’t have to have a face that looks like a basset hound in life. On the other hand, it is permissible, it is right, it is appropriate that when you are going through times of struggle—as

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the Lord did—we can talk about it with people that we trust that are near us, rather than simply trying to be brave and put up a good front.

II. The second thing that the Lord does on this occasion, as He moves through this experience, is He prays.

I know that sounds trite and all that but He does pray. And we will not successfully pass through our struggle without prayer. Luke tells us that He went out to the Mount of Olives as was His custom and John 18, a parallel passage, says to us that Judas knew where He was, for He frequently went to the place with His disciples. What so often is the case is that the crisis of the moment manifests the character of a lifetime. Crisis tells us about character. Don't worry if you're in a crisis and you didn't have character going into it. God can help you get the character while you're in it. But Jesus was frequently going to that place to pray.

Evidently, Gethsemane hasn't changed much over the years. Although it is on the western slope of the Mount of Olives, between the Mount of Olives and Jerusalem, it has many private enclosures. Churches, burial grounds, olive groves. One of the places for tourists to see is the traditional site of Gethsemane: the Church of the All Nations. They have olive trees that date back a couple thousand years. It's a very impressive sight. It seems when we're with a group, there are always gobs of other groups around. It's hard to get a moment of solace in Gethsemane. This year, while we were over there, we were walking along a road; near the traditional site is the Garden of Gethsemane, our host said, "Would you like to have a chance with your group to pray privately in a private garden?" I said, "Sure, is there such a thing around here?" We walked across the road and there was a gatekeeper at a private place. I gave him a little bit of money for his trouble. He opened the gate. We walked in and we had a third of an acre of olive groves, all by ourselves. With a teeming mass of tourists on the other side, there we were, alone to pray and

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sing, to read the Scriptures, to go by ourselves to pray. That's exactly the way the Lord had it. He couldn't, at this time, afford to be interrupted so He went to a special place, a place that was a sanctuary for Him and He was there praying.

Judas knew the place, he knew exactly where to get to it on the Mount of Olives. What was Jesus praying on that occasion? "Father, remove this cup from Me." The cup is an analogy from Scripture that goes back to Jeremiah 25 and Ezekiel 23, where the cup represented something that held God's wrath, God's judgment for sin. Jesus says, "I'm now going to drink this cup, which is God's wrath poured out on sinful humanity. I'm going to take upon Myself the punishment that God will give to persons who do not keep His law. I'm going to drink that." He didn't want to drink it, on the human side. "Remove this cup from Me. Yet not My will but Thine be done." A great struggle for Him to accept the Father's will.

That's always the case in our own struggles. In the midst of everybody else being out of God's will, if we have a heart for God, we know what His will for us is in that circumstance. Not that we know necessarily what decisions to always make, but we know what attitudes He wants us to have. It's always in His will for us to be forgiving rather than bitter. It is always His will for us to face responsibility rather than flee responsibility. It is always in His will that we give thanks rather than let our life be dominated with complaints. It is always in His will that we find the good that He is working out in the circumstance rather than those things which are not good. Those are in His will. Jesus is struggling, "Thy will be done."

There are some people on the contemporary Christian scene who say that we never ought to pray at the end of a prayer, "Lord, Your will be done." The idea being that if you pray "thy will be done," it's a cop-out in your praying. How can you have faith if you ask God to do something and then immediately after you've asked Him in faith to do something you say, "Nevertheless,

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Thy will be done”? So don’t ever pray that way, we are told. Those people who have this teaching go back to the Sermon on the Mount and say, Jesus says, “If you’re going to pray ‘Thy will be done,’ say, ‘Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’ And everybody knows in heaven nobody has any financial problems. Nobody’s on stress or burnout. And nobody’s having any moral problems. Everybody in heaven is well, nobody’s sick. So we’re to pray, ‘Thy will be done in heaven and on earth the same way.’”

The problem with that viewpoint is that it is never God’s will that Jesus suffer in heaven. There is no Calvary in heaven. There is no Gethsemane in heaven. But there was on earth, and on earth it was the perfect will of God for Jesus to go through Gethsemane and Calvary, which is, therefore, a way of understanding what Jesus meant when He said, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” It’s this way. Not that the will is the same in both places. But that our attitude toward God’s will is the same in both places. When God speaks in heaven, the angels jump right to it and say, “Yes!” and on earth, we should have that same attitude. “Yes, Lord. What do You want? Lord, Your will be done.”

That’s a prayer that we’re to pray from our heart when we’re going through a difficult time. Because we’re going to be struggling. We’re going to be in the struggle of our life between what we want to do and what God wants us to do. So often the struggle is between responsibility and irresponsibility.

III. The third thing that is important when going through a time when things around us don’t seem to be in God’s will is to stay away from blame and bitterness.

It’s interesting as you follow the Lord in the last evening of His life—in fact all of His life—there is never a note of bitterness in Him. Not even against Judas. He treated him courteously. He lets Judas kiss Him, even though He knows that in that kiss there is betrayal. Even His rebuke of

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the disciples in falling asleep is more from pity than it is from anger. He's concerned that, by not praying, they are going to get themselves in a big jam. Pray that you don't fall into temptation isn't like, "You're not praying for Me! You failed Me again! You guys are always failing Me." No. It's so easy to do that with people. "If you would just do better, I could do better." But He has a genuine heart for where they are. And His rebuke is so that they can do better.

That's a hard thing—to stay away from blame and bitterness. I'm not suggesting that that's as easy as it sounds. But it's important that we keep watching our heart in the forgiveness that God tells us to exercise.

IV. The fourth thing that Jesus did in handling this moment in His life was: He did not run from responsibility.

We've touched briefly on this. When the Lord faced the second temptation to jump from the pinnacle of the temple and let the angels rescue Him, He faced exactly what He faced three years later in Gethsemane. It's a temptation to spare Himself from suffering and to do a miracle, which would deliver Him. Indeed, that was the fear of His adversaries, that He would turn on His miraculous power and vaporize them all. Jesus refused to do a miracle to deliver Himself. He would not short-circuit His humanity by super-imposing His divinity upon it. He did not flee from His responsibility.

I think that became more vivid to me when I visited Gethsemane and walked the Mount of Olives. The first time we were in Jerusalem, we went out one night, Jewel and I took a walk through east Jerusalem, the old city, through the Kidron and up through Gethsemane, up to the top of the Mount of Olives. It was dark. There were no streetlights then and there aren't any now. A guy began following us and we began to get very apprehensive that we were going to get mugged or something. I thought, "How wonderful to be in Gethsemane and feel fear. I'm really

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reliving the Bible.” Only, with Jesus, it was an arresting group with swords and clubs. For us, there was only one. Jesus had a whole crowd come on Him.

Any time that evening, before the arresting crowd showed up, all Jesus had to do to get out of that whole deal was to simply get up from where He was praying and say to the disciples, “Let’s get out of here.” In a 10 minute walk He’d been at the top of the Mount of Olives. In 10 more minutes, He’d been at Bethany, on the other side. Ten minutes after that, He’d be out in the Judean wilderness, where nobody would have tracked Him in the dark shadows of the night and He’d been away to freedom. At any given time, up until the time the arresting party showed up, He could have gotten out of the whole deal and gotten out easy. All He had to do was walk away.

On the Church of All Nations—which is the church built on the Gethsemane site, a beautiful church—on the top of that church, there’s something I’ve noticed. It sort of captured my imagination. I don’t know what the architect had in mind, but I have my own theological interpretation for it. At the top, instead of a steeple, there is a small cross. And to the cross is tethered or tied two stags, deer, both of them very beautifully sculpted and filled with strength. Both of them are struggling with a rope around their neck to get away. I think what the architect had in mind by that was to represent, in those two stags, me and you as one of them and Jesus as the other; and by one remaining tethered and dying for us, the other tethered one could go free.

Every time I see that rope around the neck of the stag, I look at that and say, “No, that’s not what really kept Jesus to the cross.” I believe that it was not nails that kept Him to the cross anymore than it was ropes that kept Him in Gethsemane. It was His love that tied Him down. His love tied Him to the cross. I think in Jesus we see, on that night in Gethsemane, Him struggling between His feelings on the human side and what He needed to do on the responsibility side. That He had

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been called to lay down His life for His sheep. But on the other hand, that didn't feel very good.

That was going to involve a lot of hurt—physical, psychological, mental and spiritual.

I think one of the real things that happens in a growing Christian's life who hits a rough moment in life—whether it's a relational rough moment or a circumstantial rough moment—is the struggle between what feels good and what you ought to do. The feel good side inevitably is free from responsibility. “You don't have to take this. You don't have to stay with that situation.” But your responsibility side says that if you do not do that, you cannot complete and fulfill God's will. So you struggle between your feelings and your responsibilities. I'm not suggesting that feelings that one has on that occasion are even necessarily sinful. But I really think that the character of the Christian is formed in the midst of the struggle between feelings and responsibility. And if we side with our feelings in life, we will wind up short circuiting the process of God's character formation in us.

Jesus did not run from responsibility. Instead, He did something that is the fifth step in His struggle that's important for us to emulate.

V. He arose to action.

When the arresting party came, He didn't stay in some dark shadows, underneath a tree of Gethsemane and wait for them to poke around and find Him. He strode forth and identified Himself. He went out to meet them. He took action.

There comes a time in life, when we're working through difficulties or problems, in which it is time to act. One can no longer remain passive. The spiritual struggle has been made. The decision has been made and now it's time to put things to resolution. I think this may involve: “It's time to get counseling.” Or, “It's time in my life to make a new commitment to God.” “It's

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time to come to an altar.” “It’s time to pray through.” “It’s time to make a business decision.”

“It’s time to make a marriage decision.” “It’s time to decide.” And Jesus rose to action.

Without rising to action, we simply will be floating along as passive people in life. Jesus strides forth and asserts Himself at this moment. In rising to action, He completes this process of spiritual pilgrimage.

I would suggest too that these steps I’ve given you today fit well for us when we go through depression. I think that depression often accompanies soul struggle, and certainly the Lord indicates in Gethsemane that He was depressed. What should you do if you’re depressed?

Share that depression with somebody else. Don’t just carry it by yourself. Find the courage to talk with somebody about it. Pray about it. Stay away from blame and bitterness. Don’t dump the reason for your depression onto somebody else that treated you badly. I know that sounds harsh.

It may have been true; you may have been terribly mistreated. But you’ll never get healed if you just simply go on blaming somebody else with where you are in life. Don’t run from responsibility. Rise to action.

I’ve heard a great Christian counselor, Norm Wright, saying to people who are depressed,

“Think about this for a moment when you’re depressed.” One of the things depression does for us is render us almost inoperative. We don’t want to get out of the bed. We don’t want to get out of the chair. We don’t want to do anything. We’re just too depressed to do anything. Has anybody been like that? Am I the only person? I have a side of me that I’m sure doesn’t come out on Sunday morning or Sunday night, but I can get depressed. I found that depression paralyzes me. I think of what Norm Wright said, “When you’re depressed, say to yourself, ‘What would you do today if you weren’t depressed?’” I can think of what I’d do if I weren’t depressed.

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Then he says, “Get up and go do it.” That’s so easy to say. But it’s a tonic. Rise to action. That’s what Jesus is doing. He’s facing the challenge head on.

Jesus has a way of living life that says, “I’m not going to go through life as a floater, as a patch of dead fish going downstream. I’ll choose to rely on the heavenly Father to give Me strength. I will rise and I will take responsibility and I will move forward and I will move through. If I’ve got to go through Calvary, then so be it. They won’t drag Me away kicking and screaming. I’ll rise up and I’ll do it willingly.”

I think that is a powerful, a powerful mental and spiritual attitude to have on any kind of personal Calvary that God causes us to walk through. Rather than letting that situation find us kicking and screaming off into the night, and protesting against God and man for why that is happening in our lives, to rise and say—as did Jesus—after resolving it in prayer, “I’ll go through it. I won’t run from responsibility. I’ll go through it and stay with it gladly, with My heart set on You until this matter is resolved. You will see me through.”

The great news of the gospel is what Jesus experienced is what is promised for us as well. Jesus’ life does not end in death. It ends in life. It ends in resurrection. That’s always the hope we share as Christians, that no matter what dark valley—such as Gethsemane—we maybe called to go through, that is not where God’s will for us ends. His call is a call to resurrection and to life. “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25).

One of our elders, Oliver Nixon, was murdered right at Christmas time last year. I went to Houston, Texas, Christmas night to be there for the funeral the day after Christmas. The pastor of that church, where Oliver and Ella grew up and married twenty-five years ago, is a new pastor. He’d only been there about three years. He was a beautiful man of God, a pro-football player with the Dallas Cowboys. He was to give the main message of the day and I was to make

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remarks. When this pastor stood up at the funeral to give the message, he read the words from the Gospel, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.” He said that’s so often the way it is in life. We say, “Lord, if You’d just intervened, this wouldn’t have happened.” But he said, “I want to share with you what the Lord said on that occasion to Martha. He said, ‘I am the resurrection and the life.’ I’ve stood before this family twice this Christmas week to conduct a funeral, and I know your hearts are heavy today. But the Lord has ministered to me concerning this text. The Lord was talking about two resurrections. We normally take this text to refer only to the last resurrection—the resurrection of the dead. Indeed, that is appropriate. It fits that. Jesus will raise the dead. Someday, Oliver will be raised. But when Jesus first gives those words, I doubt that He is talking in that moment about the resurrection of the dead. I think He is talking about the resurrection of the living. Martha, although she is alive, is dead within. Her heart is overwhelmed with grief, as is her sister Mary’s. Before Jesus ever moves forth to raise Lazarus from the dead, He first of all resolves to do a resurrection in the living and says to Martha something that touches the nerve center and heart of her faith, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?’ It’s one thing to look at the resurrection down the road and say, ‘Yes, in that great day God is going to raise the dead.’ But it’s another thing to say in our heart, ‘This day God is going to raise the living.’”

You may be very dead in your spirit and heart today. I feel, especially, that there are people in this service who have gone through or are going through a Gethsemane-like experience. Jesus says, “This is not the end of it. This is not God’s last word concerning you. I am the resurrection and the life.” He has come to raise you and to restore you and to complete His purposes through you.

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Gethsemane is a part of life. I wish it weren't. I wish it could be avoided altogether. I wish the Lord could have avoided it. But then I would never have been saved. And you would have not been saved. I wish we could avoid all those things. I wish everything was a miraculous boat ride across the Lake of Galilee. I wish everything was ten lepers being healed. I wish everything was demons being cast out of Gadarene demoniacs. I wish everyday was the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, so that one wouldn't have to work so hard to earn a living. I wish it were all joy and fun and rides and games. But life is not. Life has its dark passages. Jesus says, "Get through those passages. Share your feelings with others. Pray. Stay away from bitterness and blame. Don't run from responsibility. And rise to action."

Closing Prayer

Lord, we want to take a moment now to open our hearts to You and ask that You would make these principles alive in our own life. That we may do that according to our need. We thank You, Lord, that You do walk with us. That we are never alone. We may be in this sanctuary today and feel lonely on the inside, but if You're with us, we are not alone. Even if people nearby us in life have let us down, as Your disciples let You down, You are with us. You've not let us down. We thank You for that. Help us, Lord, to do Your will when everybody and everything around us seems out of Your will. Help us, Lord, to maintain balance in those times in our life. And thank You for Your presence here today. Bless us as we share communion now together. May the presence of Jesus be ministered to every one of our hearts. May we all sense, deep within, that the Lord Himself walks among us. We ask in His name. Amen.