

Maundy (Holy) Thursday reflection MORNING REFLECTION

THE GREATEST PRAYER IN THE WORLD

John Piper

It is Thursday, the night before Jesus's crucifixion. This evening has been laden with teaching (John 13–17), shocking with foot-washing by the greatest for the least (John 13:3–20), epoch-making with the institution of the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:20–30; Mark 14:17–26; Luke 22:14–20), and pivotal with the departure of Judas (John 13:30).

Now Jesus and the eleven have gone to the Garden of Gethsemane (John 18:1; Mark 14:32). Here Jesus prays the greatest prayer in the world. What hung in the balance was the glory of God's grace and the salvation of the world. The success of Jesus's mission to earth depended on Jesus's prayer and the answer given. He prayed with reverence and his request was given.

The question I would like to try to answer is: How does Hebrews 5:7 relate to the prayers in Gethsemane? Hebrews 5:7 says, "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence." He was heard. He got his request. What does this refer to in Jesus's life?

Loud Cries in the Garden

Nothing in Jesus's experience comes closer to this description than the prayers of Gethsemane. "Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears," corresponds emotionally to Luke 22:44, "Being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground." "Loud cries and tears" is a description of the "agony" of Jesus.

What was the content of Jesus's "prayers and supplications" in Hebrews 5:7? If we assume the content was: "Remove this cup from me" (Mark 14:36), then what would it mean that "he was heard because of his reverence" (Heb. 5:7)? Hebrews teaches that, precisely because of his "godly fear," Jesus "was heard," that is, he received his request.

But the cup was not removed. He suffered the fullness of physical pain and divine wrath. So in what sense was Jesus "heard because of his reverence"?

His First Prayer and the Angel's Help

Both St Matthew and St Mark portray Jesus as praying three separate times, and each time returning to the sleeping Peter, James, and John. St Luke, on the other hand, gives a single summary description of Jesus's prayers, and includes a detail that points to an answer to our question, namely, the visitation of the angel. St Luke writes,

He withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. (Luke 22:41–44)

Before the angel came "to strengthen" him, Jesus prayed that the cup be removed (Luke 22:42). Then the angel came, "strengthening him." Strengthening him for what? Presumably to do what he had to do. In other words, the angel was God's response to Jesus's first prayer. The angel bears God's message that there is no other way, but I will help you. Do not turn from your mission now, in spite of the terrifying prospect. I will help you. Here is my angel to strengthen you.

Then the question is: What was the content of the prayers that followed? Luke 22:44 says, "And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly." Does this mean he kept on saying: "Remove this cup from me," even more earnestly? That assumption would be unworthy of Jesus. What then was he praying? And is this different prayer what Hebrews says "was heard because of his reverence"?

He Prays a Second Time

According to St Matthew, when Jesus went away a second time to pray, he did not say the identical words as the first time. The first time he said, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.” The second time he said, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done” (Matt. 26:42).

May we not assume that the angel had come to Jesus the first time he prayed, and had made plain to Jesus that it was, in fact, not possible for the cup to pass from him, but that God would help him drink it? Which is why, in his second prayer, Jesus does not ask for the cup to be removed, but instead asks for God’s will to be done in view of the revealed fact that “the cup cannot pass”: “*If this cannot pass unless I drink it* [which has now been made plain to me by the coming of the angel], your will be done.”

When St Mark says, of the second prayer of Jesus, “And again he went away and prayed, *saying the same words*” (Mark 14:39), it need not contradict this, as though *only* the same words were spoken all three times. “The same words” may simply refer to, “Your will be done,” which indeed Jesus prays each time.

If we are on the right track, then the content of Jesus’s supplications after the angel came was not the same as before. He did not go on praying: “Let this cup pass from me.” It says, “And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly” (Luke 22:44). If he was not praying more earnestly for the cup to be removed, then what was he praying?

His Greatest Act of Obedience

Hebrews 5:7 says, “Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, *to him who was able to save him from death*, and he was heard because of his reverence.”

If “save his soul from death” does not mean, “Remove this cup from me,” what does it mean? For he was certainly heard and received this request.

Jonathan Edwards answers,

This was the greatest act of obedience that Christ was to perform. He prays for strength and help, that his poor feeble human nature might be supported, that he might not fail in this great trial, that he might not sink and be swallowed up, and his strength so overcome that he should not hold out, and finish the appointed obedience.

He was afraid lest his poor feeble strength should be overcome, and that he should fail in so great a trial, that he should be swallowed up by that death that he was to die, and so should not be saved from death; and therefore he offered up strong crying and tears unto him that was able to strengthen him, and support, and save him from death, that the death he was to suffer might not overcome his love and obedience, but that he might overcome death, and so be saved from it.²

Jesus did not go on praying for the cup to pass. He went on praying for success in drinking it.

When St Paul says, of Jesus’s resurrection, “*Therefore*, God has highly exalted him” (Phil. 2:9), the “therefore” refers to Jesus’s unwavering obedience unto death: “Being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore...” (Phil. 2:8). God saved Jesus from death because he was obedient. His prayers were answered.

The Father’s Answer

If Jesus had not been obedient unto death, he would have been swallowed up by death forever and there would be no resurrection, no salvation, and no future world filled with the glory of God’s grace and God’s children. This is what Jesus prayed for “to him who was able to save him from death”—that is, save him from a death that would not succeed its saving mission.

“He was heard for his godly fear.” God did save him from the threat that such a death posed to his obedience. Jesus did succeed. There is salvation for all who believe. There will be a new world full of the glory of God’s grace and God’s children.

And all of this is owing to the greatest prayer in the world. Every hope of the gospel succeeds because of Jesus’s reverent earnestness in prayer, and the answer of the Father. “Being in an agony he prayed more earnestly... and he was heard because of his reverence” (Luke 22:44; Heb. 5:7).

Evidently, by the time Jesus was done praying in Gethsemane, the Father had not only made clear that there is no other way than the cross, but also that this way would succeed. The Lamb would have the reward of his suffering. He will “see his offspring; he will prolong his days; the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he will see and be satisfied” (Isa. 53:10–11). Surely this is why Hebrews 12:2 could say, “For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross.” Beneath the terrors of present agony was the taste of future joy. The angel had come, “strengthening him”—clarifying, confirming, connecting the coming joy.

EVENING REFLECTION NOT MY WILL BE DONE

Jon Bloom

“Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” (Mark 14:36)

Darkness had descended on Jerusalem. Its residents had finished their Passover meals. The lamb and unleavened bread had been consumed; the sandals, staffs, and belts put away (Ex. 12:1–11).

In Caiaphas’s house, a conference was underway with some members of the Sanhedrin, some officers of the temple guard, and one of Jesus’s closest friends. In the secluded hillside olive garden of Gethsemane, just outside the city’s eastern wall opposite the temple, Jesus sat with his other eleven closest friends. The eleven friends could not stay awake. Jesus could not sleep.

The Great Passover Unveiled

Earlier that evening, Jesus had shared with his disciples the most marvellous Passover meal of all time, though his disciples only recognized this in retrospect. Jesus had “earnestly desired” to eat it with them (Luke 22:15). For the Great Passover, the one for which the Passover in Egypt was a type and shadow, was about to take place.

The angel of death was coming to claim the Firstborn Son (Col. 1:15). The worst plague of God’s judgment was about to fall. But this Firstborn Son, being all and in all (Col. 3:11), was also the Passover Lamb who would be slain to take away the sins of the world (John 1:29; Rev. 5:6). The eternally obedient Firstborn Son, the spotless Lamb of God, would take on himself all the sin of the sons and daughters of disobedience (Eph. 5:6), his blood would cover them, they would receive his righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21), and they would forever be shielded from the death angel’s blow (John 11:26).

So the Firstborn of many brothers (Rom. 8:29), the Great Passover Lamb, had taken bread and wine and said to the first eleven of those brothers, “This is my body... This is my blood...” (Mark 14:22–25). And in doing so, the old Passover was subsumed into the new Passover.

From that moment on, the new Passover meal would be eaten in remembrance of Jesus (1 Cor. 11:23–26) and how he delivered all his brothers and sisters out of the slavery of sin and death and led them into the promised eternal kingdom of the beloved Son (Col. 1:13).

Nine Unfathomable Words

But now, among the olive trees, Jesus was praying. Many times he had prayed in “desolate places” (Luke 5:16). Yet never had he known desolation like this.

In this familiar garden of prayer, Jesus looked deeply into the Father’s Cup he was about to drink and was terrified. Everything in his human flesh wanted to flee the impending physical torture of crucifixion. And his Holy Spirit groaned with ineffable dread at the far greater impending spiritual torture of being forsaken by his Father.

Such was his distress over this “baptism” (Luke 12:50), the very thing he had come into the world to accomplish (John 12:27), that Jesus cried out, “Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36).

Yet not what I will, but what you will. Nine words. Nine unfathomable words.

God, having longed, and even pled, to be delivered from God's will, expressed in these nine simple words a humble faith in and submission to God's will that was more beautiful than all the glory in the created heavens and earth combined. Mystery upon Trinitarian mystery: God did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but became obedient to God's will, even if it meant God dying an incomprehensibly horrifying death on a Roman cross (Phil.2:6, 8). God wanted God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, even though in that dark moment, God wished in body and soul that God's will could be done another way.

Obedience in Suffering

And in that moment, another mystery came into view. God the Son, perfectly obedient to God the Father from all eternity, "learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb. 5:8). Never has another human felt such an intense desire to be spared the will of God. And never has any human exercised such humble, obedient faith in the Father's will. "And being made perfect"—having exercised perfectly obedient trust in his Father in all possible dimensions—"he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (Heb. 5:9).

As the Son learned this perfect and pre-eminently humble obedience as he yielded to the Father's will, the first drops of his bloody agony seeped out of his pores (Luke 22:44).

Barely a kilometre away, in the high priest's courtyard, his treacherous disciple prepared to lead a small, torch-bearing contingent of soldiers and servants to a familiar garden of prayer.

Your Will Be Done

No one understands better than God how difficult it can be for a human to embrace the will of God. And no human has suffered more in embracing the will of God the Father than God the Son. When Jesus calls us to follow him, whatever the cost, he is not calling us to do something he is either unwilling to do or has never done himself.

That is why we look to Jesus as the "author and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2). He is our great high priest who understands, far better than we do, what it's like to willingly and faithfully endure the sometimes excruciating, momentarily painful will of God for the sake of the eternal joy set before us (Heb. 4:15; 12:2). And now he always lives to intercede for us so that we will make it through the pain to the eternal joy (Heb. 7:25).

So this Maundy Thursday, we join God the Son in praying to God the Father, "Your will be done" (Matt. 6:10). And if we find that, in body and soul, we wish God's will for us could be done in a way different from what God's will appears to be, we may wholeheartedly pray with Jesus, "Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me." But only if we will also pray with Jesus these nine gloriously humble words, "Yet not what I will, but what you will."

Because God's will for us, however painful now, will result in joy inexpressible and full of glory, and the salvation of our souls (1 Pet. 1:8–9).