

Explore the Bible: Do I have the strength?

April 19, 2017

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for May 7 focuses on Matthew 26:36-46.*

Perhaps we all, at one time or another, have looked back on our lives and pondered how they would have turned out had we turned one way instead of another. That's especially true when we look back on very crucial decisions that were life-altering. What if we had turned one way instead of another?

In Jesus' life, the scene in today's Gospel text certainly is one of those moments. In what surely rates as the single most crucial moment in Jesus' life and the history of humanity, we're allowed to watch as Jesus faces the conflict between his humanity and his heavenly Father's divine purpose.

How to study the text

There are at least two ways of studying this text. One is to view it only as Jesus' personal struggle. There is much to be learned from studying this event from that perspective. However, to look at it from that singular perspective may cause us to miss the greater meaning of the story, the one that includes us.

It was no accident that Jesus invited Peter, James and John to accompany him and share in that moment, even at a distance. Jesus knew what was facing him on the cross. He wanted these disciples to witness what happens when our natural desire to avoid suffering conflicts with God's higher calling. He also wanted their company.

Jesus took them to a place called "Gethsemane," a garden at the foot of the

Mount of Olives. It's interesting to note that in its Aramaic etymology, "Gethsemane" means, "oil press." That meaning creates a powerful image of what was about to happen to Jesus in that garden. He was about to be pressed, as though crushed, between the power of the human condition and his divine calling.

When life 'floors' us

Jesus himself described that pressing to the three disciples as leaving him "'deeply grieved, even to death'" (v. 38). The experience was so overwhelming he didn't kneel in prayer. Instead, he literally threw himself on the ground in prayer.

If we live long enough, almost certainly, we'll all find ourselves in a moment of deep grief that literally "floors us." The power, the pain and the emotional and spiritual suffering caused by a very real loss or impending loss literally will overwhelm our ability to stand or even sit. The weight of the grief literally will cause us to fall or cast ourselves to the floor or the ground, the only place we'll be able to bear the weight of it all.

We have multiple examples of Jesus' humanity in the Gospels. None is more powerful than this one in the garden of Gethsemane. There is no heavier weight than that of grief. Jesus knew that weight personally.

Discipline of persistent prayer

Then, picking himself up, he went back to where he'd left the disciples and found them asleep. It's hard to stay awake when we're only listening in on someone else's prayer, not participating with them. In his frustration with the disciples' inability or unwillingness to join him in his grief, Jesus more than invited them to "stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak'" (v. 41).

Prayer is not a natural, human instinct. Real, gut-wrenching, persistent

prayer is one of the single most difficult disciplines of the Christian walk. We are so easily tempted to face the struggles and needs of life within the capacity of our own resources instead of leaning on God.

Perhaps that is why people learn the discipline of prayer only as they grow older. In our youth, we too easily believe we can handle life on our own. We do so at great spiritual risk, as Jesus warned the disciples.

‘Lean on God. Lean on others. And do the next thing.’

Eventually, life presents us with something that is beyond our capacity alone. If Jesus had to pray in the garden in order to face the cross, what is it that makes us think we can handle life any other way? Even the miracle-working Son of God had to fall prostrate before Holy God in order to handle the grief of doing God’s will. It’s a moment of singular focus so demanding that only with his face in the dirt could Jesus bear the thought of facing his own death.

James Flamming, retired pastor, once said when the trial comes, we should lean on God, lean on others and do the next thing. Jesus perfectly models that strategy for all of us.

In the time of life’s greatest trial, Jesus didn’t play the loner. He went to the garden to lean, and lean hard, on God for the courage to face his life’s greatest trial so that we might be saved. He took some of his disciples with him, intending to lean on them in his grief. Then, when he had done his leaning on God and his disciples, even though they failed him, he did the next thing. “The hour is at hand . . . get up, let us be going” (vv. 45-46).

Jesus is our very human model of what it means to be truly spiritual. When the trial comes, lean on God, lean on others and do the next thing. What would have become of us had Jesus turned the other way instead of the way that led to the cross?

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