

MATTHEW 26:31–56. (EHV)

Then Jesus said to them, “This night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered’ [Zech. 13:7]. But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.” Peter answered him, “Even if all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.” Jesus said to him, “Amen I tell you: Tonight before the rooster crows you will deny me three times.” Peter said to him, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you.” And all the disciples said the same. Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane. He told his disciples, “Sit here, while I go over there and pray.” He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and he began to be sorrowful and distressed. Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to the point of death. Stay here, and keep watch with me.” He went a little farther, fell on his face, and prayed. He said, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” He came to the disciples and found them sleeping. He said to Peter, “So, were you not able to stay awake with me for one hour? Watch and pray, so that you do not enter into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to pass from me unless I drink it, may your will be done.” Again he returned and found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. He left them again, went away, and prayed a third time. He said the same words as before. Then he returned to his disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise. Let us go. Look, my betrayer is near.” While Jesus was still speaking, suddenly Judas (one of the Twelve) arrived. With him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, who came from the chief priests and elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign: “The one I kiss is the man. Arrest him.” Immediately he went to Jesus and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” and kissed him. Jesus said to him, “Friend, why are you here?” Then they advanced, took hold of Jesus, and arrested him. Suddenly, one of the men with Jesus reached out his hand, drew his sword, and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place, because all who take the sword will die by the sword. Do you not realize that I could call on my Father, and at once he would provide me with more than twelve legions of angels? But then how would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen this way?” At that same time Jesus said to the crowd, “Have you come out to arrest me with swords and clubs as if I were a robber? Day after day I was sitting in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. But all this has happened so that the writings of the prophets would be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

We are continuing our series on Jesus’s passion or suffering between Holy Thursday and Good Friday. In this devotion, we will look closer at Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and see, first, the demonstration of Jesus’s love for his heavenly Father, and second, the demonstration of Jesus’s love for humanity.

We see Jesus’s love for his heavenly Father on display in his prayer in the Garden of

Gethsemane. Once Jesus and his disciples entered the garden, Jesus told them, “Sit here, while I go over there and pray.” He then took Peter, James, and John with him, and Matthew tells us that he began to be sorrowful and distressed. He told Peter, James, and John, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to the point of death. Stay here, and keep watch with me.”

Why was Jesus in such turmoil and distress? Why was his soul very sorrowful, even to the point of death? It was because of the will of his heavenly Father. His heavenly Father had sent him to earth to go through precisely this ordeal. His heavenly Father had sent him to suffer and die for the sins of humanity, and that suffering and death was now imminent. And as true man, Jesus experienced what we all would experience if we knew that we were about to experience betrayal and mistreatment, shame and disgrace, pain and torment, guilt and abandonment—only worse, because he knew in advance exactly what he would be going through, and the devil was tempting him with all his might.

If that’s the hand you were dealt from God, how would you respond? Sometimes we have responded poorly even when we have been dealt much milder hands. We have stopped praying, avoided church and the fellowship of believers, and left our Bibles unopened, collecting dust. Not Jesus. He goes even more earnestly to his heavenly Father in prayer.

I once heard from a Christian man who had a conversation with a woman claiming to be an atheist. It eventually came out that she was an atheist because of all the pain and suffering she herself had undergone and because of all the pain and suffering she read and heard about nearly every day. The Christian man was silent for a moment and then responded, “It must be hard.”

She said, “What must be hard?”

He replied, “It must be hard to know about and experience all this pain and suffering, and have no God besides.” Jesus understood that giving God the cold shoulder and turning away from him wasn’t going to help him at all. It was only going to make things worse.

Besides, he loved his heavenly Father. He once said, “I and the Father are one.” He and God the Father had lived in perfect harmony and unity, in one essence, from eternity. God the Father had not sent him to undergo this ordeal without his Son’s agreement and approval. So Jesus went more earnestly to his Father in prayer. And when he did so, he demonstrated his love for his Father even more: “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” Even as he wishes at this hour that our salvation could take place any other way, a way that won’t involve so much pain and agony, he still perfectly submits to his heavenly Father’s will, knowing that his will is best. He prays similarly the second time: “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to pass from me unless I drink it, may your will be done.” And Matthew tells us the third time he also said the same words as before.

What a comfort for us when we go to God in prayer in hardships and trials! God the Father appears to answer Jesus with a flat-out No. “No, my Son, I will not let this cup pass from you. You must drink this cup of suffering down to the bitter dregs. You must go and die.” But in retrospect we actually see how having Jesus continue to the bitter end of his road of suffering was actually a far better Yes—a Yes that won our salvation and the certainty of eternal life in heaven, and a Yes that resulted in Jesus achieving the greatest possible glory, glory that he would not have won if he had not drunk the cup of suffering.

Jesus loved his Father. So he prayed earnestly to his Father in his hour of need and he submitted to his heavenly Father’s will.

But Jesus did this not only because he loved his Father, but also because he loved us humans. We see that love especially on display when he is arrested.

We see his love for Judas, the disciple who betrayed him to the rabble that would put him on trial, condemn him, and crucify him. When Judas arrived with the rabble armed with swords and clubs, he went up to Jesus and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” and kissed him. This was the arrangement he had made with the rabble, so that they would know whom to arrest. What gall on the part of Judas! What nerve! Did he really think that Jesus didn’t know what was going on by this point? And even if he didn’t know, did he think Jesus wouldn’t even be able to guess when he could see everyone with Judas armed with swords and clubs? And then to choose a kiss, of all things, as the mark of identification!

But how does Jesus respond?

“Friend, why are you here?”

Jesus is not spiteful or vengeful. He is heartbroken. Even now, even though he knows the role Judas will play and how it will all end, he gently calls Judas to repentance. He will not leave Judas without testimony of his love and desire to save.

Then, when the rabble arrests Jesus, Peter draws his sword and strikes the servant of the high priest, who was one of the men at the front of the rabble, and cuts off his right ear.

How does Jesus respond? He touches the man’s ear and heals him! He heals his enemy! He heals one of the very men that is about to lead him in ropes or chains to a kangaroo court that will condemn him unjustly!

All of this demonstrates his love for all humans, who are all his natural enemies, including us. The apostle Paul tells us that for a good man, someone might possibly dare to die on rare occasion. “But,” he continues, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6–8).

It is this love for sinful humanity that prompts Jesus to tell Peter, “Put your sword back into its place, because all who take the sword will die by the sword. Do you not realize that I could call on my Father, and at once he would provide me with more than twelve legions of angels? But then how would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen this way?” Jesus could still get out of all of this easily. But he does not want to. He wants to fulfill the Scriptures. He wants to pay for our sins. He wants to reconcile us with God. He wants to win our salvation.

Jesus deeply loves his heavenly Father. Jesus deeply loves human beings. Jesus deeply loves you. That’s why he did what he did in the Garden of Gethsemane. That’s why he did everything he did. May his love not be shown to us in vain. May his love rather create and strengthen faith in him in our hearts, and produce love in return—love for him and for our fellow humans loved by God. Amen.