

*The Long, Dark Night Of The Soul*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*Psalm 31:9-16, 1 Peter 4:12-19, Luke 22:39-54*

Our final Scripture reading this morning comes from Luke 22:39-54. Listen now to God's Word. "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." Then seizing him, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance."

Who are we, really? Strong or weak? Brave or cowardly? Good or evil? One of the saints or one of the damned? Ask the typical person and they'll usually give you a biased response. Most people without even thinking describe themselves in positive terms. But how often do we really contemplate these things with any real objective thought? If we were to examine ourselves in the light of Scripture, how would we measure up? Our culture – and indeed most cultures throughout the world – are in many ways nothing more than distraction manufacturers, built around the idea that life will be fine if we don't think about it too much. We are entertained, tempted, coddled – but we are not challenged, not with the things that really matter. Because if we were, our lives might change in drastic ways, ways that would endanger the status quo. If we judged ourselves by the standards God has, we would find ourselves lacking, we would cling to the cure that could save our souls, and our embrace of the God who heals us would overturn everything the world has to offer.

On the Mount of Olives, Jesus faced His most difficult test. He came face to face with His own death. He'd predicted it, He knew that He would save humanity through it and be resurrected, and yet He was still anguished over it. He did not want to die, not in this way. Who would? Jesus was not a passionless martyr with a death wish. He was and is the Son of God, yet He experienced pain just like each one of us. He knew the torture of the next day would be misery beyond all comprehension. Nothing stood between Him and His destiny. In His darkest hour, Jesus models holy suffering for us and leads us to the place where the Holy Spirit can lay us bare and restore us.

The center of this passage, the thing from which everything else flows, is Jesus praying. To the casual observer, it might seem odd that Jesus spends the night talking to the Father. He has foreknowledge of His suffering, so you would think that He would get some rest or do something to get His mind off of it. From our perspective, He's going to go into this ordeal exhausted. The disciples may finally understand – Luke tells us that they are overwhelmed with grief. But instead of having insomnia, they are all sacked out. Rather than joining them, Jesus continues to pray anyway. From our perspective, it's just strange. Why would Jesus go into His darkest hour this way?

But to Jesus, this is the *only* natural thing to do leading up to the most unnatural event in history...the death of God Himself on a cross. Kneeling before the Father, talking about what is going to happen, laying His desires out before the One who sent Him...as Hebrews 5:7 puts it, "He offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the One who could save him from death, and He was heard because of His reverent submission." Jesus receives angelic help as a response to His prayer, to strengthen Him for what lies ahead. The time He spends with the Father is the lynchpin that makes His passion possible.

We have to be people of prayer. It's that simple. No matter what else we do in life, no matter our jobs, our skills, our talents and gifting, if we are not praying, our lives are not being put to best use. Now a lot of people don't pray and they seem happy and successful. What gives? It's that God often uses us and blesses us in spite of ourselves. But is that the way we want to live? God has made us for relationship with Him. When we go about our days without praying, the work we accomplish is like using a socket wrench as a hammer. The job might get done but not well, and both the nail and the socket wrench are the worse for it. When we nourish our relationship with God through prayer, we become tools useful to God, and He shows us the jobs He created us to do. Those jobs may be uncomfortable at times, but we will live with the satisfaction of knowing that we please God as we fulfill the purposes we were made for.

This week, I was knocked for a loop. After praying for someone, I was asked, "There's nothing else you can do?" It made me feel really small. All I can do is pray. I'm not a doctor who has medical wisdom; I'm not a lawyer who can settle a claim. I'm not a craftsman who can build a roof or fix your plumbing. I can teach you about the Bible and the love of God, about salvation and obedience, I can model those for you, but I can't make you believe in Him. I can't make one person who was an atheist become a Christian. I can't fix your wounded heart or your wayward son or your trouble marriage. If I give you advice, it might work or it might make things worse. All I can really do is pray. Doesn't sound like much, does it?

But talking with Catha this week about it, I realized something. Prayer is not "all" I can do. It's *everything* I can do. It's everything *you* can do. As much as we might think otherwise, we are not in control. The best baseball players in the world fail to get on base two out of every three times up to bat. The best lawyers lose important cases. The best doctors lose patients on the operating table. The only constant, the only thing we can count on, is God's sovereignty. He alone is in control. There's an old proverb that says, "Do your best and leave the rest up to God." But that's not what the Bible teaches. In prayer, Jesus shows us, give it all over to God – leave it all to Him. Do your best because He may use you as part of His solution, but that's because the Holy Spirit works through us. Prayer is the one thing, the everything, we can do.

The second thing that Jesus models for us in His suffering is honesty. Luke couches some of his language about Jesus' prayer on the Mount of Olives because he was writing for a Greek audience, one that valued stoicism. Unlike the Jews, who believed that high emotion was appropriate in times of duress, the Greeks thought that this kind of grief was a sign of weakness. When Luke describes Jesus agonizing with great drops of sweat like blood, he's describing Jesus' struggle in the same terms that would describe an athlete pushing through a marathon. Luke's portrayal would have stretched and challenged the Greeks – it would have been difficult to understand – but it didn't make it impossible for them to relate to Jesus' passion.

But make no mistake – between the four gospels, we see this event as the most emotion-laden moment in Jesus' life. He cries out to God in honesty. He does not want to die. He doesn't want to suffer, to go through a day of torture. Crucifixion kills you by making it impossible to breathe; it's one of the cruelest forms of punishment ever devised. He pleads with the Father to take away the cup of suffering. He knows the path He must take, but His honesty is breathtaking. His honesty makes Him relatable. He is the Son of God, He is fully God, but He is also fully human. He can save us precisely because He is both; He bridges the gap between God and man. In this moment, He is totally real to us.

His honesty doesn't stop just with the Father. He comments on Judas' betrayal, made all the more reprehensible because the kiss of peace and love has become a kiss of death. He's saddened not only by Judas' treachery but the way the devil takes something good and turns it evil. He calls out the cowardice of the religious leaders, who come after Him as if He were a bandit. He doesn't sin in any of this; He simply speaks the truth.

Honesty comes more haltingly to us than it did for Jesus because honesty requires us to deal with our guilt. Pastor, priest, parishioner, we are all guilty. As a pastor, I strive to preach and live the truth, but I'm not always successful. I choose the easy path sometimes. I fail to live without sin. This isn't a confessional on my part; it's just the truth. We are sinners. Sometimes we're so blinded to our sin that we can't even confess it honestly; it doesn't bother us. Even coming to the point of saying, "God, I know you call this thing a sin and I love it and don't want to give it up," is still honest. We need honesty in our lives and in our church and in our world. It's through honesty that God moves and works in our lives, because when we come clean with Him, we open up to His grace that moves us past our lies.

But beyond the difficulty of being frank about our sin, honesty with God is difficult because we've been taught that Christians are supposed to be happy people, that we shouldn't have problems, or we should keep them to ourselves. Other people don't want to hear it and neither does God. But the Scripture shows us otherwise. Jesus mourned over the loss of His friend Lazarus. He cries out for relief from the torment of knowing the suffering He will endure. On the cross, He says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Go through the Psalms and you will see David, the man after God's own heart, crying out over and over again, saying "I am in anguish." Psalm 6, 25, 31, 38, 39, 55, 116, 118, all of them are cries of "anguish." The Old Testament has three full books dealing with suffering – Job, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations. None of those books has an easy answer. The one idea that binds them together is not that we will ever understand suffering or that God will take it away – but that God knows and is listening.

As a church, we're at a point where being honest may be painful, but I believe it is what God desires from us. Financially, the path ahead is not rosy. The roof is bought and paid for, which is fantastic, and it shows us that God can and will see us through. Several months ago, we were worrying how we could possibly raise the money, and yet it's been given. God has grown our faith through it in ways we never could have imagined. But we still have a difficult mountain ahead of us to climb. While we have a "rainy day fund," we've borrowed over \$3,000 from it, and we still have about \$2,000 in bills outstanding. The last two weeks' giving added together doesn't equal \$2,000. This isn't to make anybody feel guilty. Many of you here have given sacrificially so that the roof could be replaced. You may not have anything more to give. Some of you may be able to help, which would be great. But this isn't a time for shame; we've done far more than ever before financially these last six months. This is a time to be honest before God and to cry out and say, "Lord, are you listening? We've given all we can, and we need your help more than ever! You gave us the money for the roof, and now we need You to give us the money to pay the lights and the mortgage and the pastor!" Now is the time for us to come before the LORD in humility and say in honesty, "I'm in anguish over this!" If there are tough spots in your life, in your family's life, with your friends, it's time to say it. "I am in anguish over this, and I have no way to fix it on my own without you. Help!" And while we may still struggle and suffer, God knows and is listening.

The final thing Jesus models this week is faithfulness in the midst of trial. It would have been really easy for Him to let His disciples defend Him, but He doesn't do that. In fact, He does something stunning. When Peter struck the servant of the high priest with his sword, he was probably attacking the leader of the mob. I don't think that Caiaphas, the high priest, was even there...he wanted it to happen, but attending it would have been beneath him. Because of the way social standing in that day worked, his servant – named Malchus, according to the gospel of John – would have had the authority and power to speak and act in his name. When Peter takes a stab at Malchus, it is like striking the high priest himself. But when Jesus heals Malchus' ear, in His culture, He is doing nothing less than healing the high priest. He is helping the household of the man who will lead the charge in crucifying Him. In the midst of this incredible moment of grief and sorrow and betrayal, Jesus stays true to Himself, the healer who reaches out even to His enemy with love.

Friends, faithfulness is something that we must cling to as a church. In fact, I believe we are at a point of decision in our church. We must reach out. We must be faithful to the Great Commission, when Jesus called us to be witnesses to Him, to make disciples for Him. That is our primary call as Christians. If we feed the hungry and give to the poor and clothe the naked yet do not share the love of Jesus with them and call them to believe and find salvation in Jesus Christ, we have accomplished nothing. There's a lot of pain in this church's past and a lot of broken trust. That suffering was very real. But we are also in a new era. It's been nearly two years since I was installed and almost five years since David Milam left this pulpit. God has been growing us through the study of His Son's life in Luke, through service, through laughing and crying with each other. He has been knitting this congregation's heart back together. But it is time to get back into the fight, time to bring people into the fold and welcome them as Christ welcomed us.

I've heard folks say that they like a small church; they want to know everybody. In church, we should know everybody. We should be a community where people are close enough to one another to share their struggles and triumphs, to support one another. But we are in no fear of growing too big. If someday we grow to the point where we can't offer discipleship and Christian community the right way, we'll deal with it. But now, we are on the other end. We are comfortable, perhaps too comfortable, being tiny. But that's not where God wants us to be. Honestly, if we do not reach out and grow Christ's Kingdom now, we will not be faithful, and this church will eventually fade away. It takes time and money and effort and sacrifice to be faithful. Jesus showed that we are often called to be faithful in difficult ways precisely when things are at their darkest. Evangelism, the sharing of our faith, is the way that we can be faithful in a world that's suffering like ours is. If prayer is everything yet people aren't in relationship with God, how they can pray? If salvation comes through Jesus alone but all they've experienced of Him is mockery and lies, how will they know Him unless we share the truth with them?

When I talked about evangelism with a friend in the church this week, there was a good question – “How do we do it?” Many of us here have never had any training on how to reach others with the gospel. We are going to fix that. This week, I've ordered some materials I'm going to be studying, and when we wrap up with Luke in early August, we're going to spend a couple of weeks in our services learning how to be disciple makers. It will take work, but we can be faithful to our calling. I believe it is through that faithfulness that God will grow this church.

This week, cry out to God in prayer. Honestly bring before Him everything...your joys, your sorrows, your fears, your dreams. It is when our lives are utterly exposed before His throne that we are drawn closest to Him. Bring the church before Him, your family, your finances...it's all under His sovereign control. Lay them down before Him as Jesus laid down His will to the Father on the Mount of Olives. Then go out into the world in faithful obedience to Him. When you do so, you will find the Savior with you throughout your days and nights, guiding you, strengthening you, and giving you rest even in the darkest night of your soul.