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### Not As I Will: A Meditation on Our Lord's Surrender to the Will of His Father

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# “Not as I will”

A meditation on our  
Lord's surrender to  
the will of His Father

By Earle Hilgert

**F**EW PASSAGES in the Gospels offer better evidence of being the record of an authentic happening than does the story of Jesus' suffering and prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Few passages contain more ultimate meaning for you and me. The narrative is found in Matthew 26:36-46, Mark 14:32-42, and Luke 22:39-46.

The stories given by Mark and Matthew are virtually identical: we can follow them through together phrase by phrase, and often word by word. Throughout these Gospels, in fact, many times, we find that they are extremely close, not only in what they relate, but in the wording they use to tell it.

It has been calculated that of the 661 verses in Mark, Matthew contains parallels to some 600. Scholars generally agree that Mark must have written his

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Gospel first, and that Matthew later used it, together with materials from other sources, to produce his longer Gospel. This doubtless accounts for the close similarity between their stories of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Christians have always believed that this process of composition took place under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The earliest account we have of the writing of the Gospels comes from a Christian author named Papias from the first part of the second century, scarcely a generation after the last book of the New Testament was written. He declares—and there is good ground for believing him—that the Gospel of Mark is based on the preaching of the Apostle Peter.

Papias tells us that in Peter's missionary preaching, he was accompanied by Mark as his interpreter, and that Mark wrote down in his Gospel the stories and teachings of Jesus as he had heard them so often from Peter's lips. We can easily imagine how thoroughly Mark must have had these words of Peter fixed in his mind after having translated them over and over. This means that many times in the Gospel of Mark we probably have the actual words of Peter as he recounted his memories of the teaching and deeds of Jesus.

This connection of Mark's Gospel with Peter is particularly important for our understanding of the story of Christ in Gethsemane. Writing some forty years after the crucifixion, at a time when Peter's leadership and ultimate martyrdom had raised him to a position of great prestige in the church, Mark would probably not have told such a damaging story about him if the great apostle himself had not recounted the story publicly for years throughout the Christian world. This situation has led many scholars to conclude that the story of Jesus in Gethsemane is probably an eyewitness account of this crucial hour in our Lord's life.

Today when a traveler visits Jerusalem, he finds two places identified as the site of Gethsemane. These locations are revered as holy places, one by Roman Catholics and the other by the Greek Orthodox. We cannot be certain of the historical exactness of either of them, but what is significant is that they are both on the western side of the Mount of Olives and thus reinforce each other in the ancient tradition that the Garden was in this general area. This accords with Luke's account, which does not give the name Gethsemane, but says that Jesus went "to the Mount of Olives." (Luke 22:39.)\*

The name *Gethsemane* probably means "oil press," which fits well with its being located near olive groves. Probably the Garden consisted of a walled enclosure to which Jesus and His disciples had access, and where they had been going repeatedly for seclusion during their stay in Jerusalem, for Luke says it was Jesus' custom to go there.

Although we know little of Jesus' relations with people of prominence in Jerusalem, it is reasonable to think that either He or His disciples had connections with persons who might have owned such a place and have put it at their disposal. That Jesus had been going there frequently also accounts for Judas's knowing where to find Him when he betrayed Him there later that night.

Jesus' choice of Peter, James, and John to accompany Him into the Garden for prayer is particularly significant. They were also the ones He had taken with Him at an earlier time to pray on the Mount of Transfiguration. This connection is particularly prominent in Luke, for of the three Gospel writers who tell both stories, he is the only one to say that at the Transfiguration they went into the mountain to pray, and that now when Jesus goes with the same disciples to pray, He goes to the *Mount of Olives*. Thus, especially from the point of view of

Luke's Gospel, these two prayers of Christ on mountains with Peter, James, and John are connected. What is their relationship?

We can probably best answer this question by noting the relationship of each incident to the central event of the cross. Just before the Transfiguration Peter had made his great confession, declaring Jesus to be "the Christ of God." (Luke 9:20.) Jesus had replied, saying, "The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." Luke 9:22.

To the minds of the disciples, convinced as they were that the true Messiah would not die, but would become their king, Jesus' words about His coming death must have been virtually incomprehensible. At the Transfiguration, then, they were prepared and strengthened for the disillusionment that would come to them with Jesus' death; they were reassured, both by the glorification they witnessed and by the voice from the cloud, declaring, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Luke 9:35.

The message of the Transfiguration is especially meaningful, then, when we contemplate Jesus' other prayer on a mountain, the Mount of Olives, with Peter, James, and John. Here the agony of the Passion, foretold just before the Transfiguration, began. The same disciples who had seen Him transfigured and had heard the Father's voice were now invited to share His hour of agony. The reassurance of the Transfiguration should have sustained them.

How far they really were from understanding the situation, however, is revealed not only by their sleeping, but also by Jesus' words to Peter just before they went out to the Garden. To the apostle's boast, "Even though they all fall away, I will not," Jesus had replied, "Truly, I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you

will deny me three times." Mark 14:29, 30. Although this was fully fulfilled later that night at Caiaphas's house, Jesus' finding Peter and his companions asleep three times in the Garden shows how little prepared they were to keep their vow of loyalty to Him.

The words of Jesus' prayer are particularly important because they reveal the nature of our Lord's agony. Three times He prayed, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." Matthew 26:39. For what was Jesus really praying? Was He simply seeking to avoid death? Did He cringe before the horrors of crucifixion? Was it a sense of failure in His mission that drove Him to such a prayer?

We can hardly believe that any of these provided the real reason for Jesus' agony. Such a conclusion would go against everything we know of His teaching: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Matthew 16:24. "He who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it." Matthew 10:38, 39.

In view of such teachings, we cannot think that Jesus' prayer in the Garden was motivated by a fear of death, even by crucifixion. There is obviously a deeper meaning in His words. A key to this is found in His reference to His suffering as a "cup." Even though the wording of Mark's and of Luke's accounts is very different, yet each preserves this important word. What does it signify? In the Old Testament the cup is often a symbol of that which God gives to men. Sometimes it is a good gift: "The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup." Psalm 16:5. "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord." Psalm 116:13.

More often, however, it refers to a divine judgment: "On the wicked he will rain coals of fire and brimstone; a scorching wind shall be the portion of

their cup." Psalm 11:6. "O Jerusalem, you who have drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath." Isaiah 51:17. "Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it." Jeremiah 25:15. "If any one worships the beast and its image, . . . he also shall drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger." Revelation 14:9, 10. "God remembered great Babylon, to make her drain the cup of the fury of his wrath." Revelation 16:19.

These passages show that the cup is a figure both for God's good gift of salvation and also for the outpouring of divine judgment. Within itself the symbol of the cup contains the paradox of both salvation and the wrath of God. This paradox is especially important for our understanding of Jesus' prayer that the "cup" might pass from Him, for to drink this cup was to bear the sins of men. In taking them on Himself, our Lord at one and the same time bore the judgment of God and secured our salvation.

"He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed." Isaiah 53:5. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." 1 Peter 2:24. Thus the "cup" which Christ drank was both a cup of judgment and of salvation. The dread and agony that He suffered in the Garden arose from the prospect of bearing the sin of the world.

But the figure of the cup has still further significance. When James and John sought places of special honor in Jesus' kingdom, He asked them, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" Mark 10:38. Here His atoning death is called both a baptism and a cup. This reminds us immediately of the two sacraments taught

by the New Testament, baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both are related directly to Christ's death.

The Apostle Paul asks, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" Romans 6:3. In instituting the Lord's Supper, our Lord declared, taking the cup, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Matthew 26:28. And Paul adds, "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." 1 Corinthians 11:26.

Thus the figure of the cup is of great importance for our understanding of Jesus' agony in the Garden. In praying that the cup might pass, He did not seek to avoid death by crucifixion. It was rather the weight of the world's sin that pressed on Him.

"Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." Matthew 26:39. With these words Jesus surrendered His will to His Father. We can best catch a glimpse of what this meant for Him when we remember that it was only by the power of His will that our Lord had remained sinless. "In every respect [He] has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning." Hebrews 4:15. Jesus was not kept from sinning simply because He was God. Karl Barth once said, "He could not sin because He would not sin." His will, at once the strongest and yet the most obedient, He now surrendered in His agony. In this surrender He took on Himself the sin of the world, and in so doing He won the victory over sin.

As we receive baptism, as we participate in the Lord's Supper, and as we live our daily lives, we are called on as Christians to follow our Lord's example of surrender. In following the will of God, we share in the death of Christ, and His victory becomes ours.

END

\*All Bible quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.