

Masterwork of the Messiah

Expositional Study Of Matthew's Gospel

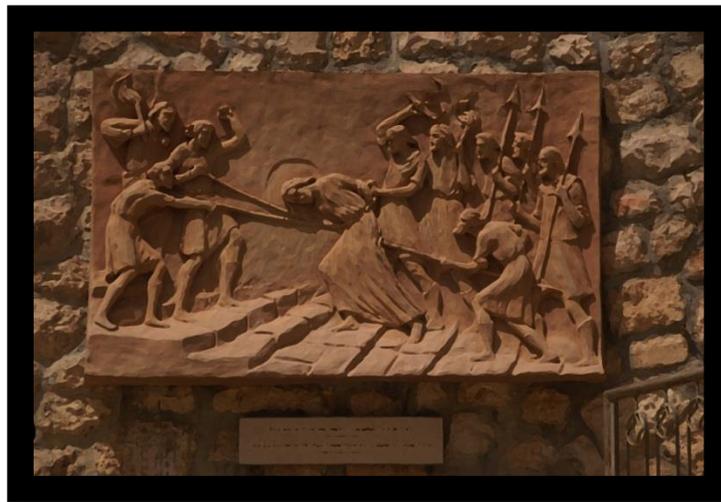
The Fight In The Forest

Matthew 26:36-46

Written By

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Everything about Jesus' life was divinely designed to teach us, His disciples, how to be His disciples in His absence after His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension into heaven.

- His encounter with the Devil in the wilderness teaches us the techniques for withstanding temptation (Matthew 4).
- His teaching, as we encounter in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), teaches us how to actually live as kingdom members before the Davidic kingdom is established.
- His multiple healings teach us the need to show care and heartfelt compassion toward those who are hurting and needy.
- His multiple cleansings of the Temple illustrate the importance of addressing religious hypocrisy (Matthew 21:12ff; Mark 11:15; John 2:15).
- His peaceful demeanor while sailing in a boat in heavy seas challenges us to trust in His absolute sovereignty at all times (Matthew 8:24).
- His constant interactions with the disciples in a variety of life settings show us how leaders are supposed to lead and develop future leaders among believers.

Yes, Christ's life represents a flesh and blood example of how we are to live as we carry out the mission the Father has given to us. We couldn't have had a better, more skilled teacher. I hope you have, and will, study His life well with one goal in mind: *to conform your life to His more and more as you make your earthly journey.*

As we consider the instructive nature of Christ's life, we readily realize that some of the greatest lessons He gives us came toward the end of His life. His spiritual fight in the forest of Gethsemane is a case study (Matthew 26:36-46). From the beginning of His life to this tranquil setting in the middle of the night on the day of Passover, the Devil sought to destroy Him in any way possible. Each time Christ prevailed no matter how cunning the attack, or how vile the verbal volleys. What occurred in this "forest" of olive trees is a lesson of all lessons about persevering in adversity and temptation in order to complete the Father's call upon one's life. For the Son, the call was to go to the cross to become the sin-substitute for the sinners enslaved to sin (Romans 3). It would be a call He would embrace wholeheartedly; however, the road to realize that divine call couldn't have been tougher and rougher. We learn this much from Christ's struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane, but we also are left with life-giving lessons from our Lord's performance about how to forge ahead in the heat of a spiritual fight.

For our purposes, the main pedagogical idea from Matthew 26:36-46 can be summarized in this fashion:

From The Toughest Of Times Come Timely Truths (Matthew 26:36-46)

I don't know where you are in your Christian walk, but if you're in heavy seas of temptation, if the gale force winds of adversity are wearing you down, if you are getting hammered by a demonically instigated hardship, it is time study and learn well from your Master, Jesus. Let's begin learning so we can head to spiritual maturity by considering the first of three life lessons from one of the most difficult nights of His holy life.

From the opening verse of this pericope, we are given the historical setting of the narrative:

³⁶ Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."

Chronologically, it was probably around mid-night, or shortly thereafter on Passover (viz., Friday). Geographically, from Matthew account (John provides even more details in chapters 13 through 17 of his gospel account), the disciples have just walked about two miles from the Upper Room to the Garden of Gethsemane. Their minds reeled, no doubt, from the things they had just learned:

- Mary had anointed Christ for His burial (Matthew 26:12).
- Christ would become the Passover lamb.
- A disciple, of all people, would betray Christ to their enemies ... the religious authorities (Matthew 26:21).
- All of the disciples would betray their Rabbi, Jesus, and Peter, their bold, courageous leader, would actually deny knowing Him three times before sunrise of the present day (Matthew 26:31-35).

With all that troublesome information in mind, they crossed over the Kidron valley/ravine, stained with the blood of thousands of Passover sacrifices (John 18:1), and entered the private ... and probably walled ... Garden of Gethsemane on the western slope of the Mount of Olives. They were emotionally drained and physically spent from all the day's activities; however, Jesus gave them one firm, though simple command:

Sit here while I go over there and pray.

Verse 37 reveals this command applied directly to eight of them minus Peter, James and John were invited to go further into the "forest" of olives trees with Jesus:

³⁷ And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, ...

Since only the wealthy could afford a costly grove like this so close to the capital city, Jerusalem, it was mostly likely, as I've said, a walled garden in order to protect it from intruders, thieves, and the curious. Leaving the eight disciples when they first entered the garden suggests they served as guards of the gate, as it were.

Why in the world did Jesus go to this garden, known as the Garden of Gethsemane? Let's isolate the reasons because we know Jesus never acted without precise purpose:

- The word Gethsemane means "olive press." No doubt, a large press was located here because of the number of fruitful olive trees on this side of the mountain. Olive trees, some 1,000 years old, still dot



A picture from the Garden of Gethsemane I took in April of 2011.



Grinding stone from Bet Guvrin south of Tel Aviv.

this hillside. Here is a shot of some of them I took back in 2011. Extracting olive oil was quite the process. One press crushed the olives as they were placed on a large, grooved stone. After this, olives were placed in burlap bags and then placed in a press. There were two press types. One had a heavy stone affixed to a large screw. Olives were placed in a stone base and then crushed until the coveted oil ran out into a collection basin. The other press employed fulcrum power exerted on the bag of olives by a large and long wooden lever. Again, a strategically placed outlet permitted the oil to drain into a basin for collection. After a few days the water and oil from the olives separated,

leaving the lighter oil on the surface for easy collection. Since Christ was going to be crushed for our iniquities (Isaiah 53:5), it was, then, only logical for Him to be here. The whole place spoke of His redemptive work.

- Olive oil represents many facets of the salvific work of Jesus, hence it was fitting for Him to be here on His last night on earth. Olive oil was used to consecrate prophets, priests, and kings (1 Kings 19:16; Exodus 28:41; 1 Samuel 10:1 respectively) for the righteous work of God. Jesus, of course, would be all of these roles rolled up into one as we've learned in our study of Matthew.
- Olive oil was intrinsically tied to the name of the Messiah, the Anointed one (I Samuel 7:1-17; Isaiah 11:10; Jeremiah 23:5; Zechariah 3:8; 6:12). What better place for the Anointed One to be than a garden which represented an abundant supply of anointing oil? How perfect.
- Olive oil was used for a variety of purposes which metaphorically and spiritually were, and are applicable, to the saving work of Jesus: oil lit lamps in Israel and it was certainly used to light the Menorah in the Temple (Jesus stated He was the light of the world,); oil softened skin for medicinal purposes (the Messiah would be a healer, Isaiah); and oil was used for personal cleansing (Jesus would cleanse the soul of the stain of sin,). Again, the Garden of Gethsemane was a perfect location for Christ's betrayal by Judas.
- The Garden of Gethsemane gave Jesus a birds-eye view of the Temple grounds where the Passover Lamb would be slain at 3 p.m. that day. He could look across that Kidron ravine knowing that He would, in fact, become THE final Passover Lamb.
- From the vantage point of Gethsemane, Jesus could look west at the Golden Gate when He would one day walk through as the victorious Davidic King in the Kingdom/Millennial Age (Ezekiel 40:1-3; 43:7; 44:1-3). What encouragement and hope this view would have given Him on such an emotionally difficult evening.



Subterranean olive press from Bet Guvrin.



Looking east from the Garden of Gethsemane entrance at the Temple Mount and the Golden Gate.

- Jesus prayed and was betrayed in a garden located on the very same mountain, viz., the Mount of Olives, where He would come to at His glorious Second Coming (Zechariah 14:1-4). Again, what hope this would have given Him at such a difficult time in His holy life.
- Finally, though not exhaustively, Jesus, the second Adam (Romans 5:12-21), took on the temptations of the Devil, as we shall see, in a garden and became the victor, not the victim, as we saw in the first Adam (Genesis 3).

No, wonder, then Jesus prayed here. No other place in Jerusalem afforded Him such theological significance, hope, and encouragement as He prepared Himself to become our sacrifice by means of Roman crucifixion.

From this particular garden episode, we now must harvest the rich spiritual fruit before us. As I've stated earlier, four truths/fruits can't be missed.

Don't Go Alone Into Tough Trials ... Do Go With Key Godly Friends (Matthew 26:37-38).

We encounter this truth head-on beginning with verse 37:

³⁷ And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. ³⁸ Then He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me."

Peter, James, and his brother John represented the inner core of Christ's leadership structure, plus there were some of His closest friends. They had been with Him on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17), and they were there when He raised the girl from the dead (Luke 8:51-56). These men, apart from their personal personality issues, were teachable, dependable, and highly loyal. What better friends to be with as you faced the reality of your coming death? Did Jesus really need them? In His humanity, yes, and such is the wonder of this unique passage. Here in these verses we get a picture of Christ's human nature. Just like us, He craved close, supportive friends to be with Him as the hour of His betrayal and crucifixion started to materialize. Who better to be with Him for prayer support? Who better for verbal encouragement? Who knew Him better than they did? No wonder they were invited to one of the most trying, troubling times in Christ's life ... and they were there for Him, at least physically.

Note how Christ spoke to these dear buddies. He let them know how grieved and distressed He was, letting them know that what He was facing was so complex, so demanding it felt like He would just die from the strain of it all. The Greek for "deeply grieved," is a highly intensive word, *perilupos* (Περίλυπος), being formed from a preposition affixed to a verb. This is grief which comes from the depths of your soul, resulting in your whole body feeling its effects. After I preached my father's graveside service, I walked over to my car with Liz and children and cried like have never cried. It was as if my whole body hurt from the pain of the deep, penetrating grief. Such is but a small picture of what Christ relayed to the disciples.

Why was Jesus grieved? Again, we have here a mysterious combination of the divine and human natures of our Lord. From the human side, He grieved as He contemplated the horrific, painful death He knew He would die. From the divine side, He grieved because He, who knew

no sin, was about to bear all the sin of the world for all time. You probably need to read that again. Think about the magnitude of this. Every murder, rape, lie, theft, jealousy, injustice, , slanderous word, abortion, pride, hatred and the like would all be placed upon Him, the Holy One, as the ultimate Passover sacrifice. Put differently, He was primarily grieved because He was about to willingly take upon Himself the full weight of all of man's godless defilement, as prophesied (Isaiah 53:4-6).

This is why He asked Peter, James, and John to come with Him. His command after He relayed the heaviness of His soul to them couldn't be missed:

... remain here and keep watch with Me.

He wasn't speaking about guard duty, but prayer duty. The darkest day of His life loomed over Him like some ominous storm cloud, the Devil prowled the garden to be sure, and all He wanted was for His three best Christian friends to stand by and pray for Him.

Stop right there. If Christ needed His friends as He encountered troublesome times and temptation, how can we think we are any different? I don't know what you are facing right now, but don't go into or stay in that storm alone. Solomon knew what He spoke about when he stated:

⁹ Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. ¹⁰ For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. ¹¹ Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? ¹² And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart (Ecclesiastes 4).

I've been in that fight in the forest many times. Sometimes it is because of an adverse, gut-wrenching situation like a loved one with a disease, or the loss of a good friend through a tragic accident, while at other times it has come in the form of a powerful, cunning temptation. I've been victorious and strengthened because I've never been alone. God has always seen fit to place the right spiritual saint in my life at the right time to help me stand. When my father battled brain cancer, my good friend, Rick Sealy, who himself was battling pancreatic cancer, consoled and comforted me.

Should you be fearful right now, maybe even bitter and angry, I know what you need. You need some Christian friends to stand and pray with you as you face down the Devil.

Do Pour Your Heart Out To God ... He's Ready To Listen (Matthew 26:39, 42, 44)

Because of the gravity of the moment, Jesus needed a little more privacy in prayer. Sometimes that is the nature of working through the tremendous trial or temptation. Three prayers represent three counters to three waves of Satanic temptation. The Devil tempted Christ three times after forty days and forty nights of fasting in the wilderness of Judea to prepare for His ministry (Matthew 4:1-11). Three times the Adversary attacked Him, seeking to throw His messianic mission off course, and now at the end of His ministry and mission, there are three prayers. Why three? The fact Jesus counseled His men to pray so as to avoid temptation

suggests the Devil was working overtime in the garden that night. Three prayers here, as compared to the three temptations in Matthew 4, readily suggest Christ battled the Devil that night as He prayed. We aren't given all the details but we can guess the nature of the temptations. With his raspy voice can't you just hear him say tauntingly,

- “Jesus, why don't you just use your powers and head back into heaven, bypassing the crucifixion?”
- “Jesus, why don't you just go ahead and call a few thousand angels to get you out of this fix before Judas arrives.”
- “Jesus, mankind just isn't worth it, and you know that. So, save yourself and leave these guys in the garden.”
- “Jesus, you, of all people, certainly don't deserve to suffer. After all, you are the Son of God, the holy One.”
- “Jesus, why should you the Author of Life experience death that mankind brought upon himself?”
- “Jesus, what should you, the epitome of Justice, lower yourself to be treated with the epitome of injustice by these lesser, selfish creatures?”

Can't you just hear the ol' Dragon seeking to discourage and derail the Christ from His prophesied and highly important redemptive mission?

Just perhaps the ol' Dragon is whispering in your ear.

- “Get real. If God loved you, then this tragic event wouldn't have happened, right? So go ahead. Blame Him and walk away.”
- “You have every right to be bitter, so just enjoy it in light of all that God has allowed to happen to you to make your life so much harder.”
- “Look, just give in. You know you want to enjoy the easier road. It a whole lot more fun than the road you're walking on.”
- “You know, if God loved you, as they teach you at church, then He would have answered that prayer you've been praying for years. What a joke. Give it up and move on. Go ahead and just live a little. What could it hurt?”

Yeah, it's true. The Devil still shows up to fight saints in the forest. How are you faring? Want to do better? Want to be triumphant? Want to grow spiritually? Want to know true peace? Want to be fortified for the trial you might face tomorrow? If so, then learn from the activity of Christ. When facing down the Devil, He did one thing well: *He prayed*, and if you pay attention to the context, one of His prayers lasted for at least one hour.

³⁹ And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.”

⁴² He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, “My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done.”

⁴⁴ And He left them again, and went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more.

Several things need to be carefully noted about these powerful prayers of Jesus.

One, sometimes your situation is so complex, so soul-stirring, so problematic it is not enough to sit in your easy chair and talk to God. No, sometimes the complex nature of the trial or temptation calls ... really moves ... you to literally fall on your face before God, to get as low as you can before Him to show Him just how much you worship and need Him.

Two, don't be afraid us intimate words when addressing God. As the Son faced death, Jesus turned to His father and verbalized His wonderful, endearing name. How do you address God? Do you let Him know that His spiritual son or daughter is crying out for help and assistance. As any earthly father will run to the sound of his child crying out for help, the heavenly Father will hear you.

Three, be honest in your prayer. Jesus was. I like the way John MacArthur explains Christ's first prayer:

The Father sent the Son to the cross, but he did not force Him to go. Jesus was here asking if avoiding the cross were possible within the Father's redemptive plan and purpose. The agony of becoming sin was becoming unendurable for the sinless Son of God, and he wondered aloud before His father if there could be another way to deliver men from sin.¹

Jesus wasn't argumentative. He wasn't disrespectful. He was just honest in His humanness. Since this is how He prayed, we can, and should, do no less. The Father wants to hear from your heart. He wants to hear what you are thinking, what bothers you, what troubles your soul, what trips you up, and the like. He wants, really craves, honesty and authenticity as you fall down before Him. So, what about it? While you are engaged in a fight in the forest, will you open up with your heavenly Father who cares deeply about you?

Four, Jesus didn't pray for His will, but for the Father's will. The cup represented not only His eventual suffering and death (Isaiah 51:22; Jeremiah 25:15-16), but also the Father's complete wrath against sin. Jesus was willing to drink from that cup, if the Father so willed. What obedience. Being obedient to the Father's will which called for Him to become sinful man's sin substitute permeated Christ's life. He never demanded His rights. No, He constantly looked to fulfill the redemptive mission the Father devised for mankind and one which He, the Son, willingly accepted. All throughout the gospels, we clearly see He came to specifically do the Father's will, even though it would be personally costly and demanding:

⁴ Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work (John 4).

³⁰ I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me (John 5).

¹ John MacArthur, *Matthew* (Chicago: Moody Publishing, 1989): 174).

²⁹ And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him (John 8).

How dare we pray demanding or asking anything without adding the humble phrase, “... not as I will, but as You will.” God’s will is infinitely more perfect than ours ever will be. God’s will is the best will we could ever live to see. God’s will can certainly accomplish far greater spiritual purposes than our will could ever dream. So, what about it? Are you ready to give Him your requests wedded to that all important statement for Him to work out His will in your life above all things? Jesus followed the Father’s will and look what He achieved: Salvation for sinners. The Father will work powerfully in your life as well, accomplishing other spiritually purposes; however, He’s waiting for you to place your will in the back seat to His will. Such is the path to winning the fight in the forest.

Don’t Pull Away From Godly Friends In Tough Times ... Do Pull Up (Matthew 26:40, 41, 43, 45,46).

Sadder words have not been written than these:

⁴⁰ And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, “So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? ⁴¹ “Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” ⁴² He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, “My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done.” ⁴³ Again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴ And He left them again, and went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more. ⁴⁵ Then He came to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ “Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!”

When Jesus returned from His first hour of gut-wrenching prayer, He couldn’t believe His three closest followers were fast asleep. They had abandoned Him, completely. He was with them, but they, for all intents and purposes, were not with Him, spiritually speaking. They chose sleep over prayer without a thought, and I’m sure they had their excuses, “All that wine and heavy food from the Passover meal, coupled with all the events of the day just caught up with us, Lord?” Right. If the Messiah told you He was grieved to the point of death, and you also knew His death was fast approaching because of prior prophetic statements He had made, you would think this would, in and of itself, cause you to stay up and pray as He intimated when He commanded you to be watchful. But none of the spiritual battle mattered to them. All they wanted was a little shut-eye. How tragic. When they should have been prayin’, they were playin’.

How did Jesus respond to His friends? He rebuked them and reminded them of the weakness of the flesh. They were about to enter one of the most difficult and demanding times of their lives when Judas arrived with the troops, and not one of them was prepared for the spiritual fight. Because they chose the temporary enjoyment of the flesh, viz., sleep, they would

easily succumb to the temptation to desert their Messiah, and one of them, Peter, would even go so far as to deny any relationship with Him three times.

Jesus departed a second time to pray, and when He returned He found them sleeping again. This time He didn't bother confronting them, knowing they had totally succumbed to the power of the flesh to sleep instead of denying oneself so much needed prayer could be uttered.

The third time Jesus came back from praying would be the last time they were together, and He found them asleep as before. This time He informed them, as they rubbed their sleepy eyes in confused shock, I'm sure, that the time of His betrayal and crucifixion had come ... as prophesied. He was ready for the trial of the day because He had battled the Devil and his temptations before the throne of the Father. Unfortunately, the disciples were not equipped for what was about to transpire for they were not, as they say down south, prayed up.

I light of these closing verses, I must offer a few salient observations.

One, have you promised to pray for a friend in tough times, well, are you? Have you? Will you? Don't desert them. Pull up alongside them and make sure you bring their name and their situation before the Father.

Two, we, as saints, are all called to be watchful and to pray for we live in godless times. Peter, who learned the hard way, wrote these instructive words for us toward the end of his life:

⁸ Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Peter 5).

I don't care what your age is. You can be a Junior Higher or a senior citizen; however, if you claim the name of Jesus, you, as His disciple, must wake up to the presence of the Devil and pray for God's protection. Being asleep in the forest is to court spiritual disaster.

Three, if you are facing a spiritual fight in a forest, then there is only one thing you should be doing. You should be devoting yourself to prayer. And I'm not necessarily talking about one of those two minute versions you might be accustomed to. Since Jesus prayed for several hours this night, I find great instruction in this, don't you? Many of our prayers in tough, tempting times are far too meager, too short, and too quick. We waltz into God's presence with great speed and we leave with even greater speed and then we wonder why there victory eludes us. Perhaps it is time to head off into a garden by yourself for a little prolonged time of prayer with the Almighty.

Our Lord had a spiritual fight of all fights in a forest of olive trees before His crucifixion. I don't know about you, but I'm glad He got powered up by getting prayed up. He went up to victory on Friday at 3 p.m. because He went down to His knees in prayer. Give Him praise for being in that forest for us. Better yet, go and learn from His example the next time you are walking in the moonlight of a grove of familiar trees with a heavy-duty event hanging over your heard.