

## The Meaning of the Cross – The Garden

*Mark 13:32-42*

We're looking at the final events of Jesus' life in the gospel of Mark, and seeing what it has to teach us about his death on the cross and its significance for our life. We said at the beginning of this series that Jesus' death on the cross is more than an example to us. Jesus is not just our example. He's our substitute. The cross does not just say, "Here's what a selfless, sacrificially loving life looks like. Now you go out and live the same way, too." The cross accomplishes something for us that we could never accomplish for ourselves. And all these different episodes we're looking at show us different aspects of the substitutionary nature of Jesus' death.

This week we're looking at one of the most famous, and heart-wrenching, episodes in all the gospels: Jesus' agony in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus has just had his last meal with his disciples, and in a matter of hours, he's going to be arrested, tried, convicted, mocked, flogged, and crucified. And here he is in one last moment of solitude and freedom, praying to the Father. Now, one of the core teachings of the Bible is that Jesus is both 100% God, and 100% human. And one of the fascinating things about the gospels is that we frequently get these glimpses into the humanity of Jesus. They'll tell us that Jesus was tired, or hungry, or angry, or moved with compassion. But this episode in the garden is probably where we go deepest into the humanity of Jesus. The curtain is peeled all the way back. Of all the places where we see his humanity on display, this is probably the fullest, deepest, rawest, most intimate, and most vulnerable. And as I've reflected on this passage this week, I think there's a reason why.

What do you do when there's a conflict between your will and God's will? What do you do when there's a conflict between something you really want and something God commands you to do? Or, say you're not a Christian, but you're investigating it. What do you do when you're exploring the claims of Christ and you encounter something that challenges the way you want to live or something you believe?

You realize what we're talking about. Obedience. It's almost a four-letter word in our culture. We live in the West. We live in a culture that always, always trains us to question authority. And I'm not saying we should never do that. Some of the greatest moral advancements of our society have come from people who were courageously willing to confront corrupt authority systems. But it also creates in us a mindset of absolute self-sovereignty, that unless I as an individual fully understand and fully agree with something, then I should not have to submit to it. It's a view of human flourishing that says every individual should be free to decide for themselves what is right or wrong, good or bad, desirable or undesirable. So what do you do when you want something, I mean really want it, but as far as you can tell, it doesn't appear that God wants the same thing? What do you do when obedience to God costs you? This passage has a lot to teach us about that. There are two tests here: the test we failed, and the test Jesus faced.

**The test we failed** – Where does this scene take place? A garden. Now, this is incredibly significant for us. Why? Why is the fact that this takes place in a garden so significant? Last week we spent a lot of time talking about the temple, and how the Garden of Eden was the precursor to the temple. The garden was the place of God's presence. It was the place where God dwelt in perfect, intimate relationship with the people he created and loved. And the reason that was possible was because up until that point, there was no break in the relationship. There was perfect obedience, perfect alignment between God's will and our will.

In fact, if you go back and read Genesis 2, you'll see that there was only one rule. Not even ten commandments at this point. Just one. "Don't eat this tree. You can eat all the other trees, just not this one." Now, a lot of people have tried to figure out what was it about that one tree that God didn't want them to eat it. And there are some good guesses, but they're really nothing more than guesses, because God never told them why. The only thing he said was, "Don't eat this tree. For the day you eat of it, you will surely die." But death was not the reason to not eat the tree, it was just the result of what would happen if they did. God never gave them a reason why not. And that's the point.

Let me ask you something. What makes a healthy relationship? There are a number of things you could say. You might say respect. Or honesty. Or even love. All of those are crucial to a healthy relationship. But there's one thing that makes all those other things possible. And that's trust. It is impossible to have a healthy relationship without trust. When God said, "Don't eat the tree," he wasn't inviting us to a negotiation about the relative benefits of eating or not eating the tree. He wasn't inviting us to understand, he was inviting us to trust. When you tell your 3 year-old, "Don't stick that key in the light socket," do you expect them to understand the workings of electricity and conductivity? No. You expect them to trust you. When you tell your 10 year-old, "No, you can't take the car for a drive," do you expect them to understand that if they take the car for a drive, they'll never see 11? No. You expect them to trust you.

Obedience requires trust. If you say, "God, you said for me to do this and not to do that. I'm a reasonable person, and I'm prepared to obey, but first tell me why," that is not obedience. That is a negotiation. And negotiation is all about control. The reason we don't trust God is because we think we know how our lives are supposed to go, and we want to be in control. Don't you think that if there are things you could never explain to a 3 year-old, that there are things God could never explain to you? I've got a newsflash for you: the difference between God and you is infinitely greater than the difference between you and a 3 year-old. Obedience requires trust. Otherwise it's not obedience. It's a negotiation. And therefore no longer a relationship. And that is exactly what happened in the garden when the first humans ate the tree. One rule. One standard. And we couldn't live up to that. The result was a shattered relationship with God.

Now, why have we taken so much time to go through all this? Because we need to see that the first garden was a place of testing. A loving relationship requires trust. And trust means there are going to be times we have to obey without understanding all the reasons why. Otherwise it's not trust, and therefore not love. Don't you see? If God answered every question we have (which is impossible), then it wouldn't be a loving relationship anymore, because there would

be no room for trust. That was the test in the first garden. Would we trust God and obey him in the context of a loving relationship, or would we reject a loving, trusting relationship in favor of control.

And likewise, this garden is another place of testing. Notice not just where they are: a garden. Notice who's there. Of course, all the disciples. But in **verse 33**, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John further into the garden with him. And a lot of people have supposed it was because Jesus wanted their companionship and prayers in a moment of great distress. But he doesn't stay with them. He goes off a little farther. And he doesn't ask them to pray for him. In fact, a little later in **verse 38**, he says, "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation (which means "testing")." What's going on?

Back when they were having dinner together, Peter had made a very bold promise. "Lord, everyone else may betray you. But I will never betray you, even if I have to die." Bold promise. High standards. In fact, it says he was emphatic about this. And James and John had also made some pretty bold promises to Jesus. We saw a couple of weeks ago that they had promised Jesus that they were able to drink the cup and go through the baptism he was going through. Peter, James, and John had very high moral and ethical standards for themselves. But when they came to the garden of testing, they couldn't even stay awake. In a matter of moments, they'll be running for their lives. And in a matter of hours, Peter will deny the Lord 3 times.

Ok. So what does all of this show us? Let me put it as concisely as I can: God asks us to live up to his standard. But we can't even live up to our own. A lot of times, people will ask the question, "Why did Jesus have to die in order for God to accept us? Isn't it enough to just be a good person?" Ok, let's entertain that question for just a moment. How good do you have to be in order for God to accept you? What's the standard? Is it God's standard? God's standard is perfection. That's pretty high. Let's say, just for the sake of argument, that God isn't even asking us to be perfect. Let's imagine that all he requires is that we live up to our own standard. That's it. Just live up to your own standard. Do you want to know what your standard is?

Francis Schaeffer was a Christian author who had a great illustration about this. Imagine there's an invisible tape recorder around your neck. You don't know it's there, but you've got it your whole life. And when you die and show up before God, he says to you, "I'm the fairest judge you'll ever meet. You didn't even believe in me. So I'm not going to judge you by my standards. Here's what I'm going to do." And he reaches out and takes the tape recorder from around your neck. And you say, "Where did that come from? I didn't know that was there!" And God will say, "No, you didn't know it was there. But this tape recorder only recorded the times in your life when you said to other people, 'You ought' or 'You should.' It only recorded your standards for other people. Therefore, that's what I'm going to judge you by." Is there anyone here who would want to take God up on that? We can't even live up to our own standards. Much less God's standard. And the reason is because we want to be in control of our lives. We don't want to trust God, because that would cost us control. This garden is a reminder that we've all failed the test, and we've all broken the relationship. What can be done? That leads to our next point.

**The test Jesus faced** – Once we understand all of this, we're in a position to understand how significant it is that Jesus is not just fully God, he's fully man. He's the second Adam. And this is the second garden, and therefore a second test. Because God the Father said to Jesus, "There's only one way that human beings can have a restored relationship with me. When trust was broken, the relationship was broken. And therefore the only way the relationship can be restored is for someone, some human being who is perfect in obedience, to pay the cost of fixing what was broken." What was that cost? Whatever it was, it was immense.

Because look at how Jesus responds to this. In **verse 33**, it says that Jesus "began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death." Like I said in the beginning, we've had glimpses before into the human experience of Jesus. But nowhere in the gospels do you see anything else like this. He's sorrowful, even to death. He's greatly troubled. That word "distressed" is a word that means to be astonished or shocked. Jesus was shocked by something. Now, here's the question. Didn't he know he was going to die? And the answer is, of course. This is pretty amazing. Because there are lots of people over the centuries of have died horrible, gruesome deaths for the sake of some cause, and they've faced those deaths with so much more poise and strength than Jesus shows here. They went into the fire singing. But Jesus is shocked and dismayed to the point of death, because what he's facing is something so much bigger than death. What was it?

He tells us in **verse 36**: And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me." The cost was drinking the cup. We talked about this a couple of weeks ago. In the Bible, the cup is an image for the wrath of God on human sin. In **Isaiah 51:17** it says, "you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath, the cup of staggering." Or in **Ezekiel 23:31-34**: "You shall drink a cup that is large and deep, a cup of horror and desolation, you shall drink it and drain it out, and tear your breasts." Jesus was staggering, but it wasn't from mere torture and death. Oh, no. He knew his whole life that one day he was going to have to drink this cup. But now he gets to the mouth of the furnace, and all of a sudden he begins to feel the incredible, overwhelming heat and destruction that was coming from it, and into which he was about to plunge. There was no way he could prepare himself for that. And here he begins to actually experience it. He gets the first taste of it, just a foretaste of it is enough to shake him to the ground and beg to be released. Because he wasn't just facing death. He was facing the infinite, cosmic wrath of God on all human sin. All of the weight, not just of your sin, but the sin of the whole world, was coming down upon his shoulders. All the weight of all the broken trust, all the ways you've tried to be your own Lord and savior, all the ways you've broken God's heart by trying to control your own life instead of trusting him, all of the hell, the separation from God, that erupts in our lives as a result of our betrayal, all of that was coming down on Jesus. And he shuddered. He staggered. But he stayed.

Friends, Jesus did for us what we could never do for ourselves. We could never be good enough for God to accept us. We can never live up to his standards. We can't even live up to our own standards. Our lives are characterized by nothing less than habitual, perpetual, and alarming departure from God. That's what we do. And there's absolutely no way for God to destroy the sin in our hearts without destroying us. No way, except for one. And it's right here. Because

God came to the first Adam in the first garden, and he said, "Obey me, and you will live." It was a test of trust, a test of love. And the first Adam said, "Not your will be done, but mine." But here's Jesus, the second Adam, in the second garden. And now God comes to him with another test, and another chance for one human being to love and to trust. But this time God said, "Obey me, and I will crush you to the ground." And this Adam said, "Not my will be done, but yours." Jesus is the second Adam who passed the test of love and trust and obedience, and it cost him everything. He didn't just lose his life. He lost the Father, so that you could have both.

And when you see that, all of a sudden you can come back to the question we asked at the beginning. What do you do when there's a conflict between your will and God's will? What do you do when obedience costs? Friends, the application of this to our lives is very simple, but incredibly difficult. Jesus calls us to a costly obedience. Obedience will always hurt someplace. Not every place, because there are things God will call us to do that we love. It will be a delight to us. But there's always someplace God's word is going to challenge you and call you to do something, to change something, to give up something about which you may care deeply, to obey something that you don't like, and to do it not because you understand, and certainly not because you like it, but because you trust. Listen to me, if you're exploring the claims of Christ, and you're struggling with the question, "What am I going to have to give up? What's this going to cost me?" The only way you will be able to move forward is by asking not, "Do I understand?" but "Do I trust him?" And the only way you can trust is to look at Jesus here in the ultimate test and the ultimate act of trust. When you see what he did for you on the cross, that's how you know this is a God you can trust, and that no matter what he may ask you to give up, he lost infinitely more, and paid an infinitely greater cost than you could ever pay.

I want to tell you a story about someone. It involves an issue that is pretty controversial in our society. My goal is not to enter into that controversy, but to encourage you to hear the story of someone who has wrestled with the cost of obedience to what she believed God was calling her to do in her life. I listened to an interview recently with a woman named Rosaria Champagne Butterfield. She was a postmodern, hyper-liberal professor of English at Syracuse University, and also a lifelong lesbian. She was, as she describes herself, an "unlikely convert." But through a series of events and relationships, she began to explore faith in Christ. And obviously, there was a big question for her: What's this going to cost me? She was in a committed relationship with another woman. And she had to wrestle with the question, "Am I going to have to give up this relationship?" And there was a lot she didn't understand, at least not at first. And she was talking to a pastor friend of hers who was helping her through this journey. And at one point she just blurted out to him,

"This is so unfair. What does everybody else have to give up?" The pastor said, "I don't know. Why don't you go ask them?" And she describes it by saying, "Here I was, this candid, New York researcher walking around the church asking people, "Ok, I have to give up the girlfriend. What do you have to give up?" She was struggling with it. She didn't understand, and she wanted to know why she should give up something that mattered to her deeply. But as she talked to people, she said, "It was amazing. People answered my question. And they answered it in such a way that I realized, true believers have to give up everything. Everything. I met people who

had buried children. More than one. And whose faith was still strong and still vital. And I realized, that person had to give up a lot of bitterness to be a Christian. It was always deep. It wasn't just the material things that people had to give up, but also the emotional barriers. And it was really then that I started to think about it. Nobody said this is going to just be great. They did say that it would be vital, that it would be life-giving, that it would be nurturing.

Dear ones, Jesus passed the test that we could never pass, and paid the cost that we could never pay. And because he did that for us, we can begin to grow into obedience in our lives. We can begin to follow Jesus even when it costs us, even when it hurts, because we know that this is a God we can trust with everything, and who gives us everything.

One of the commentators I read this week said about Jesus in the garden that, "When Jesus feels farthest from God's presence he is in fact closest to God's will." Friends, there are times in the Christian life when you will feel exactly the same way. Forsaken, abandoned, and yet still called to trusting obedience. And the times when you feel farthest from God's presence may also be the times when you are in fact closest to God's will. Because that is the way of Jesus. That is the way of the cross. Because the moment he cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me," that was the moment when he was right in the center of God's will.

C.S. Lewis once wrote a very unique little book called *The Screwtape Letters*. It's a series of letters from a senior devil to a junior devil on the finer points of tempting humans. And just as to us the devil is the enemy, to them God is the enemy. And so this senior devil named Screwtape is writing to his nephew named Wormwood about a particular human being that's struggling with obedience. And this is what he says:

"You must have wondered why the enemy does not make more use of his power to be sensibly present to human souls in any degree he chooses and at any moment. But you now see that the irresistible and the indisputable are the two weapons which the very nature of his scheme forbids him to use. Merely to over-ride a human will would be for him useless. He cannot ravish. He can only woo. For his ignoble idea is to eat the cake and have it; merely to cancel them, or assimilate them, will not serve. Sooner or later he withdraws, if not in fact, at least from their conscious experience, all supports and incentives. He leaves the creature to stand up on its own legs – to carry out from the will alone duties which have lost all relish. He wants them to learn to walk and must therefore take away his hand. Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.

Friends, the delight of the Father may never rest on you more fully and more powerfully than in those moments when you feel farthest from him, and yet because you trust him, you still obey. Look at the second Adam. He passed the test in the garden, and said, "Thy will be done," so that you could look to the Father and say, "Father, not my will, but thine be done." Let's pray.