

“What’s Going On at Gethsemane?”

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 1/05/2020
Text: Mark 14:32:42 at FBC of Newport, NH

//32 They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” 33 He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. 34 “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them. “Stay here and keep watch.”//

—Mark 14:32-34 (NIV)

One of the biggest theological obstacles to my putting Rock Johnson into book form was to figure out what to do about the cross. It’s a scary thing to think you have a story where you can change certain details to bring the characters and setting up to date, because even though you can do that to some extent, you don’t want to change something essential and lose the core meaning of the Gospel. The cross is about as core as you can get. And so I kept about as much of it as I could. I didn’t try to make it all that different. I let it fly in the face of our modern and Maine culture and crucified Josh on a cross beam on the lower part of a telephone pole just outside the Bangor Mall.

But another obstacle was the fact that Peter was not there at the crucifixion. Consequently, neither was Rock Johnson. So when chapter fifteen comes up in Mark with the actual crucifixion we aren’t getting Peter’s eye witness account of it. We’re getting someone else’s recollection. John’s or Mary’s, one of the other women’s, or a combination. And so, in chapter fifteen of my Rock Johnson story I only have Rock describe what he knows in general. And I use words right out of the scriptures (though they’re in the form of the Gospel of *Mack*); I have Rock do some reflecting on what he’s heard; I use a couple of poems; and that’s it.

All of this, however, helped me to discover something else going on in the story of Jesus’ Passion Week. The importance of the prayer at Gethsemane. Because Peter was there, so I could examine it more closely through Rock Johnson’s eyes.

Gethsemane had always been one of those Bible stories that left me feeling on the outside of what’s really going on. The cross itself seems easier to relate to as it’s obvious that Jesus is suffering from the flogging and the brutal fact of his being nailed like a poster to a wooden cross ... to die in front of the whole world. But at Gethsemane it’s simply Jesus off at a distance praying and his closest companions trying to pray. But instead

they are mostly sleeping in the late of night. Why is there such agony expressed by Jesus? What is it with Peter, James and John sleeping when they should be praying? What is going on at Gethsemane?

At least half of the answer to that question has to be: **We don't know.** That's clearly indicated by the difference between what's going on with Jesus and what's going on with his three closest disciples. It's like they're in two different worlds. They themselves *are* on the outside of what's going on with Jesus. It's as if you have a grown up and three children in the same room together. They're all listening to the news on the radio. The children don't comprehend what's being said and are bored quickly. The reporting is over their heads. They want to change the station.

The adult, on the other hand, has a completely different experience. He takes in the words, comprehends them, and responds to them with all the emotional force appropriate. He is deeply moved by the announcement of simple words uttered by a distant voice.

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Members of the Senate, and of the House of Representatives: Yesterday, December 7th, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.

—President Franklin Roosevelt's *Pearl Harbor Address*

This is just a shadow of what was going on as Jesus and those disciples responded differently in that garden of Gethsemane. Jesus was fully in tune with the reality of the cosmic and heavenly conflict upon him. The hour had come. His life was to be given up as the only hope for sinners. This was the beginning of the most decisive moment in human history, with the weight of it being squarely upon the shoulders of Jesus. It is a comprehension and weight that only Jesus could fully understand and bear. The rest of us are children looking on, or even sleeping.

Having said that, there are still things we can say about Gethsemane which are true and can bring some satisfaction in answering “What’s going on at Gethsemane?”

The name “**Gethsemane**” means “**olive press**” or “**oil press**”. It was a section of the garden where the wine presses were. The olives would be collected, put into a basin and then a huge, heavy stone would be placed over them to crush them to a pulp so that their oil would run. In God's economy of his word and meaning in the Gospel story, you know this is of great significance. The weight of the entire world's sin, as well as the weight of God's righteous wrath is about to fall. Whether they know it or

not, everyone is about to see how Jesus will endure under this weight. People will think the full weight comes only in the form of human trials, injustice and the most horrible form of execution. They'll expect death to have the final say over Jesus' life and he will be limited to the judgment of human history, like any other man, where he will be found wanting.

What most everyone will not realize is that Jesus will also be under the weight of God's examination and judgment. He must be without spot or blemish. It will not be enough that he simply suffer and die. Jesus must endure without the smallest yielding to sin. In the analogy of refining, he must have no dross, the scum that forms on the surface of molten metal must not form on him. His life has to be pure through and through. In the analogy of the olive oil, he must be crushed completely—and purely—so that the oil in him flows completely and fully—to the satisfaction of God.

With this maybe we can at least begin to appreciate what was coming over Jesus here between the Last Supper and the Cross at Gethsemane.

Gethsemane is the beginning of the end. It doesn't begin when he breathes his last. That's when it's finished. Nor does it start with the first nail being struck. It's not when he is flogged. Nor is it when he is arrested and put on trial. The beginning is found within the confines of Gethsemane at the first urging within him to pray. The time had come. The hour had come. The wait was over. The purpose and focus of Jesus' life was no longer just an idea. It was no longer distant or even near. It was at hand, here and now. The purpose of Jesus to die for our sins and rise on the third day as the first fruits of a whole new creation was upon him now.

But what about Peter, James and John? What was their part in this? Why the urgency for them to pray? And why couldn't they? They weren't going to the cross. They were being spared that. They were not going to die even for their own sins, let alone for all the world's. Were they supposed to pray for Jesus and help him out? I doubt it. But even if they were supposed to, they failed.

Jesus actually spelled out why he wanted Peter to pray, implying why the others should pray as well. It was to "keep watch." At first we may think Jesus meant to guard the place so he's not interrupted. But later he clarifies what he meant.

37 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Couldn't you keep watch for one hour? 38 Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." —Mark 14:37-38

Peter was to keep watch in prayer for his own sake. He thinks he is strong. He thinks he is the one who will follow Jesus no matter what, even if all the others fall away. But in truth he thinks wrongly. He doesn't know how weak he is on account of his flesh. And so he must pray.

It's like this, the crushing of Jesus is going to also be a pressure on Peter and the others. They too will be tested, right along with Jesus. It's not that they will go to the cross and endure all the weight put upon Jesus. That is for Christ alone. But because they love him, follow him and have their lives tied up in him, they will suffer greatly on account of his suffering. And they won't understand it. They will be susceptible to doubts, fears, temptations of compromise and despair as their Lord is struck and torn away from them and as they themselves scatter in panic.

In light of this Jesus calls them to pray. On the outside it will appear to them ... it will shout at them of despair, defeat and death because Jesus has gone to the cross. So it is all the more important for them to be in communication with God on the inside, where they can be attune to their God and their spirit. Yet they could not keep it up for even one hour. Let alone for the three days now come upon them.

As Jesus himself was praying for this cup to be taken away from him, if there's any other way to save our sinful world, I believe God answered him by his finding Peter, James and John sleeping instead of watching and praying. His best disciples couldn't even take care of themselves. How would anyone take care of the world's sin, if not for Jesus to do so?

Also, in the case of Peter and the exceptional trial he would go through in denying Christ, it is significant that where Peter fails to pray for himself, Jesus prays for him. As well as dies for him. He was saved throughout, but it would have gone better for him if he would have prayed.

The importance of Gethsemane is the importance of the cross. It is the beginning of that trial and tribulation. It is the beginning of God's victory and our salvation. But it is also the beginning of a great testing of our faith in that victory and work of God. Sometimes our best 'work' is to wait, watch and pray about things we don't even understand.

There are many ways Gethsemane can challenge us today. A death in the family, an illness that comes upon us, an unresolved matter of faith raising doubt within you. These can come to any believer. If we don't think so, then we are, like Peter, most vulnerable of all. It is vital we have faith in Christ. And though we can be saved through trials even if we stumble in weakness, it will go better for everyone if we will faithfully wait, watch and pray, until that Day of his appearing.