

## The Suffering Saviour's Admonition To His Sleepy Disciples.

Text: Matt 26:40-41

Suggested Hymns:

342, 346, 426, 338, 300

1) A brief overview of the text

2) A warning against temptation

3) A remedy to overcome temptation

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 26:40-41, ***40 Then He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "What! Could you not watch with Me one hour? 41 Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."*** (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The Lord had foretold the disciples of His impending death and the effect that it would have on them. And as the Lord and His disciples were walking towards the Mount of Olives, where He had often gone to pray, His disciples assured Him of their loyalty, even unto death.

Arriving at the entrance of the garden called Gethsemane, located on the mountain slope, the Lord told His disciples to remain there while He went into the inner part of the garden.

Only three of His disciples were to accompany Him, Peter, John, and James, the three who had been eyewitnesses of His transfiguration.

The Lord, in order to prepare Himself for the coming ordeal, with its accompanying tortures and experiences decreed by a just and holy God, withdrew from His three disciples to pray.

Between His prayers He returns to His disciples; but, alas! He finds them asleep — asleep, while Jesus, for whom and with whom they had expressed a willingness to die was treading that wine-press alone. Jesus arouses them, saying: ***41 Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation.***

Let us consider these words of Jesus today. May the Lord bless our meditation.

## 1. A Brief Overview Of The Text

The name Gethsemane means “*olive oil press*.” The garden on the slope of the Mount of Olives was a place where they brought olives to be squeezed so that the oil could be sold. There was a ready market in the temple on the opposite side of the Kidron Valley.

Luke tells us that “each evening” during the final week of His life Jesus “*went out to spend the night on the hill called the Mount of Olives.*”<sup>1</sup> And so on Maundy Thursday evening, Jesus *went to the Mount of Olives, as He was accustomed, and His disciples also followed Him.*<sup>2</sup> Thus “*Judas, who betrayed Him, also knew the place; for Jesus often met there with His disciples.*”<sup>3</sup>

Peter, James, and John had been privileged to witness the display of Jesus’ divine glory on the Mount of Transfiguration.<sup>4</sup> Now they were going to see Jesus in the depths of His humiliation.

The anticipation of a painful ordeal is often more agonising than the ordeal itself. That is one reason why we are better off not knowing exactly what the future holds for us. But Jesus knew what He would have to endure in the hours ahead. He was face-to-face with death.

Before he could witness another sunset, His bruised and blood stained body would be taken down from the cross and hastily placed into a borrowed tomb. Jesus knew what was coming. The extreme agony of body and soul that He suffered in Gethsemane was even greater than the physical pain inflicted upon Him by His enemies.

Jesus’ agony was intensified because He was not facing death as an ordinary man. We are born into this world with the taste of death in our mouths. Our entire lives are a gradual process of dying.

Still it is a fearful and terrible thing for a mortal man to die, because we were originally created to live. The bond between body and soul was not intended to be broken. But when sin came into the world, that bond weakened. Sooner or later our souls will be separated from our bodies. For the sinless Son of God, however, death was most unnatural, not ordinary at all.

The agony of anticipating death was so much greater for Jesus, not only because He was no ordinary man, but also because His was no ordinary death.

We experience the natural consequences of our own sins when we die. But Jesus' death was the unnatural consequence of the sins of others. The burden of the sins of all people was upon His shoulders.

Just think of the terror that a guilty conscience can bring upon one sinner who is face-to-face with death. Then consider the fact that Jesus had voluntarily taken the guilt of the whole world upon Himself. It is no wonder that Jesus said to Peter, James, and John, as written in Matthew 26:38, ***“My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death.*** We cannot begin to comprehend His anguish. We can only thank Him for what He endured for us.

Jesus' agony of body and soul was increased by the fact that He was facing a lonely death. He knew that His disciples would soon be scattered. Satan would attempt to divide and conquer. In a sense, the disciples had already abandoned Him. Three times Jesus returned to find Peter, James, and John fast asleep.

Jesus did not deny their good intentions. He knew they sincerely meant what they had said about being willing to die with Him. But they had failed to take the weakness of their flesh into account. When Jesus came back and woke them up the first time, they must have been embarrassed that they had disappointed Jesus.

Since Jesus was the Son of God, it would seem that He would have been aware of the absolute necessity of His substitutionary suffering and death. After all, that was why He had come into the world in the first place. So how could He now seem to forget it?

We can solve this mystery only by pointing to another one: the humiliation of Christ. He took upon Himself our human nature, and without giving up any of His divine powers, He refrained from using them for His own benefit. Paul says that Jesus ***“made Himself of no reputation.”***<sup>5</sup> The Greek word literally means ***“He emptied Himself.”*** That is why the almighty Son of God was not strong enough to carry His own cross all the way to Calvary.

Our text says, <sup>40</sup> ***Then [Jesus] came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, “What! Could you not watch with Me one hour? <sup>41</sup> Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”***

Jesus rouses them out of sleep with a renewed call to watch, to be awake, to be ready, to be on their guard, and to pray. Note that Jesus does not say, “watch *with me*,” but He combines watching and praying both of which are to be *for themselves*, “*lest you enter into temptation.*”

To watch is to be ready in advance, and to pray is to receive from God the help needed in the critical hour. The remarkable thing is that the rebuke of Jesus is so gentle, and that even in His agony and distress Jesus can think of the needs of these sleepers. The temptation at hand is a trial or test.

With the words “*indeed*” and “*the*” the two subjects of the next sentence are neatly balanced, but the English cannot reproduce this delicate balance. “The spirit is eager, but the flesh is weak,” reveals the situation exactly.

All true disciples are no longer simple, but altogether complex personalities. Regeneration has produced “*the spirit*” in them, the new divine life, we may call it faith. This spirit is open to God and to Christ and thus ready to respond to their promises and their directions. Every Christian constantly has this experience.

On the other hand, he still has in himself “*the flesh*,” which, when it is in this way placed in opposition to the spirit, refers to the old sinful nature that still clings to our being after conversion. This flesh opposes the spirit,<sup>6</sup> in fact, it would like again to get complete control of the person.

When Jesus says the flesh is “*weak*,” He speaks of it from the standpoint of the spirit. The spirit is eager enough to endure and to overcome the temptation, but the flesh in us is “*weak*,” utterly helpless in temptation, a drag and a terrible handicap to the spirit in us.

By calling on the disciples to watch and to pray Jesus seeks to rouse their spirit into full activity. By sleeping and giving way to sleep-producing sorrow of heart they were yielding to the flesh. So the word of Jesus warns them in regard to this flesh; and the test of their trial is almost at hand.

## **2. The Suffering Saviour’s Admonition To His Sleepy Disciples A Warning Against Temptation**

In our last Lenten meditation we heard the Lord tell His disciples that they would all be offended because of Him. The events of the night and the following day would blast their hopes, and their faith in Him would receive a severe shock.

The troubles of Christ were temptations to His disciples. They were temptations for the disciples to disbelieve and distrust Him, to deny and desert Him, and to renounce all relationships to Him.

Let us look at the cause of this temptation. The phrase <sup>41</sup> *Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation.* In other words “Watch and pray so that you *do not enter* into temptation.” The terms “lest” or “do not enter” indicate that the temptation is not an external cause, but an internal one.

Jesus had repeatedly spoken to them of His death. We read in Luke 18:31–32, <sup>31</sup> *Then He took the twelve aside and said to them, “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished. <sup>32</sup> For He will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked and insulted and spit upon.*

Jesus had referred them to the prophecies of the Old Testament. We read in Matthew 26:31, <sup>31</sup> *Then Jesus said to them, “All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: ‘I will strike the Shepherd, And the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’* The disciples were told this and yet the disciples would still be offended. Why?

Firstly, they had not learned to subject their own reason and understanding to the Word of God. And Secondly, they neither realised the damnableness of sin nor the necessity of the death of Jesus.

It is still the same today. People are offended at the very essence of Christianity, that is, a suffering Saviour, and the vicarious atonement, which means, Jesus fulfilling the law perfectly in our stead, and suffering and dying in our place.

People are tempted by their own reason and understanding. The Gospel of the Crucified is foolishness to them. The fundamental doctrine of Christianity, “One for all,” is offensive to them.

### **3. The Suffering Saviour’s Admonition To His Sleepy Disciples A Remedy To Overcome Temptation**

The Saviour, being the omniscient God, knew of the danger threatening the faith of His disciples and therefore admonished them to “watch,” that is, to be on their guard against sleepiness and indifference, and also against their own reason.

The Hymnist wrote:<sup>7</sup>

Let me be Thine for ever,  
Thou faithful God and Lord;  
Let me forsake Thee never  
Nor wander from Thy Word.  
Lord, do not let me waver,  
But give me steadfastness,  
And for such grace for ever  
Thy holy name I'll bless.

This means that we are to guard against any new modern gospel, and also guard against self-righteousness.

Luther expressed this thought in a hymn:<sup>8</sup>

With might of ours can naught be done,  
Soon were our fall effected;

And then Luther continued

But for us fights the valiant one  
Whom God Himself elected.  
Ask ye: Who is this?  
Christ Jesus it is,  
Of Sabaoth Lord,  
And there's none other God;  
He holds the field for ever.

Satan is cunning. He uses popular preachers to sow the seed of doubt. Therefore pray for firmness and steadfastness, for childlike faith, and for strength to withstand and overcome temptation.

Always turn to the Lord for help. Remember the Sixth Petition of the Lord's Prayer. **And lead us not into temptation.**

*What does this mean?* God tempts no one to sin, but we ask in this prayer that God would watch over us and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our

sinful self may not deceive us and draw us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins. And we pray that even though we are so tempted we may still win the final victory.

As Christians, we pray that our Father would keep us strong in His Word, because our faith is under constant attack. God helps us resist temptations by providing us with the Word of Christ, the Holy Spirit, Baptism, Absolution, the Lord's Supper, and prayer, as armour and weapons.

Let us close with the words of the hymnist,<sup>9</sup>

Rise, my soul, to watch and pray,  
From thy sleep awake thee,  
Lest at last the evil day  
Suddenly o'ertake thee;  
For the foe,  
Well we know,  
Oft his harvest reapeth  
While the Christian sleepeth. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 21:37

<sup>2</sup> Luke 22:39

<sup>3</sup> John 18:2

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 17:1-8

<sup>5</sup> Philippians 2:7

<sup>6</sup> Gal. 5:17

<sup>7</sup> Hymn 300

<sup>8</sup> Hymn 195

<sup>9</sup> Hymn 338