

**Matthew 26:17-46**  
**Willingness and weakness**

What would you do, if you knew that you were going to die tomorrow? Perhaps I need to qualify that a little, because in many cases someone's health declines, and we might say that someone is "at death's door" at that stage. What if you still had all your physical and mental faculties, and you knew you were going to die tomorrow? How would you spend your last 24 hours?

It might be doing **something wild**, that you had never dared before ... but now, what have you got to lose? It might be something a whole lot more **quiet and personal** - and probably tearful.

And I'm not daring to say that one of those is right and one of those is wrong. But what we have in today's passage in Matthew 26 is a description of what Jesus did, knowing that not just death, but *that* death ...

... ***even death on a cross.***

(Philippians 2:8)

... was due on the next day. But we also see here something of what

... ***becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.***

(Philippians 2:8)

... means, when we read the account of Gethsemane. That was something, we're told, that even the Son of God needed to learn by painful practice:

***Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.***

(Hebrews 5:8)

And that strange thought can hopefully prove an encouragement for us, too. I'm sure we will all identify with what Jesus told Peter later on:

***"The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."***

(Matthew 26:41)

We do feel that, don't we? We *want* to follow Jesus ... but there are times when those desires and inclinations just seem to evaporate. Maybe we think it was OK for Jesus, because he's *God*, right? Actually, no, and here is the evidence we need. It was difficult for Jesus at times, too. Although much of the time - and even in much of the passage we're looking at today - he seems calm and totally in control ... in Gethsemane we see him almost broken by what lay before him. And therefore we are told ...

***For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet***

***without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.***

(Hebrews 4:15-16)

And we need to learn the lesson that is built into that verse with the word ***then***. Because Jesus understands our weakness “from the inside”, that should make him all the more approachable. We know that God knows us inside and out, but you could just see that as distant and theoretical knowledge. Wonderful, and true, but just omniscience, God knowing this like he knows everything else.

***As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.***

***For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.***

(Psalms 103:13-14)

But face down on the ground in Gethsemane - the only time in Scripture that Jesus prostrated himself - the astounding fact cannot be avoided: that he understands what it is to be tempted, too. He has walked a mile in our weak, human shoes. And he was walked the *extra* mile in our weak, human shoes. And we can *therefore* draw near with confidence to that throne of grace, not to be saved just the once, but to receive mercy and grace for every day.

***Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.***

(Hebrews 2:17-18)

So we see in this passage that **even when profoundly distressed, Jesus still chooses the agonising road to the Cross.**

Each of these sections here could have a sermon in its own right, but we'll have a look at them all this morning, and come back to think them through in a bit more detail, if you like, this evening. Don't think that just listening to this sermon is the full deal. Thinking it through together later on is an even better way to grow in your understanding.

There's a series of shocks here:

the inner-circle traitor  
the altered passover  
the arrogant leader  
the vulnerable Saviour

- **the inner-circle traitor (17-25)**

We left it last week with this hanging over us. In case we had forgotten, Judas, for whatever reason, has initiated a plan to get rid of Jesus, much to the delight of the Jewish establishment. Money has exchanged hands.

***And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.***

(Matthew 26:16)

And it's possible that the bit of secrecy implied in our first section today is in response to that. Jesus is still in charge, you see. His betrayal and capture must take place only when *he* permits. So only two of the disciples are commissioned to make the necessary arrangements. Judas doesn't yet know the location of this Last Supper, when Jesus had some final words to speak to his disciples. In fact, it's all left to the very last moments possible. It seems that Jesus might even have forgotten things!

***Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?"***

(Matthew 26:17)

But of course he hasn't. We're not told the details here by Matthew, though we get some of them in the other Gospels. But it looks as if Jesus has made some kind of arrangement on the quiet already. Someone has been primed for this moment.

***He said, "Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'" And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover.***

(Matthew 26:18-19)

Quite a bit of stuff to do, but Matthew spares us the details. If we were Jewish, we would know what was entailed. If not, it might be interesting, but it's not vital to the story. So we move forward to the next day, in Jewish thinking - though we would say, "that evening".

***When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve.***

(Matthew 26:20)

There's a bit of debate about whether this was a full-works Passover meal, in that there's no mention of the lamb among the food. And you might have also heard that Jesus died, the following afternoon, at precisely the time that the Passover lambs were being slaughtered. It's a bit of a puzzle, in all honesty, but it certainly *looks* as if this could be a regular Passover meal that he and his disciples are eating together.

But this was going to be like no Passover these men had ever attended before. There are two immense shocks about to hit them. Some of them might still

have been remembering what Jesus had warned them, months previously, about something possibly underhanded.

***As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.”***

(Matthew 17:22-23)

But only now do his disciples hear how this is going to happen. There were various ritual words that would have been expected at a Passover supper. But this must have come as a total bolt out of the blue.

***And as they were eating, he said, “Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.”***

(Matthew 26:21)

They might have speculated how this “handing over” would have happened. An arrest during a particularly provocative parable, perhaps. Something done to Jesus’ little band *from the outside*, surely ... but no. Just as predicted, actually. In the next few verses we see just how accurate and literal the prediction was:

***Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me.***

(Psalms 41:9)

And you can tell two things by the disciples’ response here:

***And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, “Is it I, Lord?”***

(Matthew 26:22)

First, they don’t think it’s Judas. He has covered his tracks *from them* very well. But also, they are thinking in terms of inadvertent slips, rather than a considered betrayal. The way Matthew wrote it in Greek, it’s looking for a negative answer: *Surely not me, Lord?* It looks to me as if they are suddenly scared that *they* might be the one who makes some inadvertent error that has these terrible consequences - like the one who has to be **voted off** each week in the “reality TV” series. But Jesus’ answer implies that it is a much more considered action that he’s speaking about.

***He answered, “He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.”***

(Matthew 26:23-24)

It will be a knowing, calculating act, by someone in the room, violating the expectations of hospitality between guest and host. And just look at that profoundest of warnings, too, about the consequences.

Folks, don't get this one wrong. I remember my Mum saying that she had a kind of a soft spot for Judas, because this betrayal thing was just forced upon him by the necessity of history. He couldn't have resisted ... it might seem.

I can see that it's a tempting kind of argument, but it's a false one. Even now Jesus is reaching out to him by this very warning. He could still have turned back. God's sovereignty over history doesn't compel people to do anything contrary to their will. But there are two warnings here, I think.

First, the terrible reality of judgement. Jesus says *better if he had not been born*. That can't mean simply annihilation, total cessation of existence. That would *equate*, I would have said, to not being born. No, Jesus says it is *worse* than that. Mentally, I don't think any one of us likes to go there, and think through what that implies. But Jesus does not give us the option of ignoring what he clearly says here. That is what sin does. That is what sin will do to me or to you, if we refuse to come to Jesus for salvation. We must not fool ourselves.

The other warning, though: just think of what must have been passing through Judas' mind at that moment. See how difficult it is to climb down and admit sin. Rather than lose face, Judas would rather lose his soul. Rather than admit that he needed grace, he would "be authentic", as they say nowadays, and condemn himself. That is seriously scary. But don't we find that pride will prevent us from doing all sorts of things that we know we should do? Perhaps we should think this through a bit this evening, and see how it can apply in various areas of our lives.

So just look at the bare-faced deceit here, in the final verse of this section.

***Judas, who would betray him, answered, "Is it I, Rabbi?" He said to him, "You have said so."***

(Matthew 26:25)

Notice that even Judas cannot bring himself to say "Lord", there. And Jesus' reply, in the ESV, is a very literal translation. What it probably meant, originally, would be captured by our Americanism, *You said it!* Probably whispered, so that the others cannot hear, but Judas cannot escape this moment of his final fatal choice. He knows that Jesus knows. But he *will not* back down. It is a huge tragedy.

Folks, we must just learn this: *do not refuse to back down, when Jesus speaks*.

But there is perhaps an even bigger shock coming, at the Passover meal.

- **the altered passover (26-29)**

***Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, ...***

(Matthew 26:26)

There were traditional words of the Passover ritual that he would most likely have said at that point, reminding the guests at the table of the meaning of the bread. Only now, he said something really terrible, probably revolting to their ears.

***“Take, eat; this is my body.”***

(Matthew 26:26)

And what came next was even worse!

***And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood ...***

(Matthew 26:27-28)

Jesus has totally hijacked the significance of the Passover with this. But he has not *totally* overturned its meaning. Passover looked back to the Jews’ escape from Egypt, liberation from slavery. That imagery is still there - only more so. Passover looked to a literal lamb that was literally killed, and there were things to do with the literal body and blood, as part of the ritual ... and Jesus had to be *literally* killed, for those symbolisms to work.

And look what this now is meant to symbolise. There had been an “old” covenant - a previous agreement that God had given to his people. But that “old” covenant had some serious weaknesses - check out the book of Hebrews for the details. Weaknesses that were serious enough that a *new* covenant is needed.

There’s overlap, of course. It’s not a total rebuild of the system, but it’s a whole lot more than, in computer terms, do you want to upgrade from Windows 10 to **Windows 11?** Windows 10 is still quite good enough to keep your computer going, by the way. It’s really a question of would you prefer the improvements of Windows 11 ... or would you actually know what they were, when it comes down to it?

But with the new *covenant*, it is all the difference between a mere model and a working device. It’s like the difference between a **picture of a fireplace** and the real thing: the picture doesn’t actually radiate any heat. So under the old covenant, we would find in Hebrews, all those sacrifices didn’t *really* forgive sin - they only pointed to what sort of thing would be needed *in order to really forgive sin*. And that is what you get in the *new* covenant - or, more precisely, that’s what you get in Jesus.

***“... for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”***

(Matthew 26:28)

So, unsavoury as the image of consuming blood might be to good observant Jews, Jesus is saying that if we do not completely identify ourselves with what his

blood achieves, if we do not take its benefits into our lives, if we do not come to him by putting our faith in him ... our sins remain unforgiven. It is time to stop playing with the old covenant model. It is time to move on to the new covenant reality and the new covenant experience.

It's shocking to those men who had met to celebrate what they probably hoped would be some kind of moment of peace and calm as Jerusalem became ever more turbulent around them. It's maybe shocking even to our ears, so many years later and in a totally different culture. But it's *true*.

- **the arrogant leader (30-35)**

The Last Supper is finished. The little group leaves the Upper Room. Judas, we read in another Gospel, has already left. The remaining disciples probably think he has left on some errand that Jesus had asked him to perform. But we know the background from Luke and John:

***Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve.***

(Luke 22:3)

***... after receiving the morsel of bread, [Judas] immediately went out. And it was night.***

(John 13:30)

Some symbolism to the word "night" there, I suspect. But the rest of them move out into the night, too - without that dark symbolism.

***And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.***

(Matthew 26:30)

Eastward out of the city, where there was this quiet garden lower down, just across the valley. And maybe when they get there, or maybe on the way - remember that Matthew's "then" is often not very specific in terms of time ...

***Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee."***

(Matthew 26:31-32)

That line about Galilee seems to have been forgotten. An angel is going to have to remind them, when Jesus is raised, several days later. But that makes sense here, because that first line comes across as yet another shock, and probably it's being taken as some kind of accusation or insult. And who just cannot keep quiet at a moment like that? It's Peter, of course - who quite possibly felt the sting of insult most strongly, if he was regarded as the leader of the disciples.

***Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away."***

(Matthew 26:33)

He doesn't just feel confident, notice. He feels *superior*. Folks, look around here. Do you see people with weaknesses? You might well be right. We've all got weak spots, blind spots, areas in which we are less skilled. I'm sure that we need the next pastor of this church to have more of the gifting of an evangelist than I have.

Yes, you may know that people around have their shortcomings. It would be stupid to refuse to recognise that. But the question is, do *we* feel superior to *them*? Is there something of this arrogance that we can surely hear in Peter's voice here? *THEY might*, yes. But *not ME*, no, never.

Peter, bigger shock again for you, as Jesus calmly reveals the depth of his actual weakness.

***Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times."***

(Matthew 26:34)

And look, isn't Peter here really rather closer to Judas, who also wouldn't back down when Jesus calmly speaks painful truth to him? That pride thing again, isn't it? An even bigger boast - to cover even the possibility of the perception of weakness.

***Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!"***

(Matthew 26:35)

And here's human nature working so predictably. The rest of the disciples had to match Peter's show of boldness.

***And all the disciples said the same.***

(Matthew 26:35)

Folks, are we really so scared of looking weak, of sounding unspiritual, that we will say all sorts of stupid things, rather than look sub-standard Christians? What about this line from the chorus that some churches tack on to that old hymn, *O happy day, that fixed my choice*?

*He taught me how to watch and pray  
And live rejoicing every day*

Folks, I would love to say I could honestly claim that. All I can honestly claim on that point is that I refuse to sing those words. I have *not* reached that standard. Yes, I look back to that happy day, nearly 50 years ago now, when God's spirit moved in my heart and fixed my choice on Jesus Christ. But I am not yet triumphantly rejoicing every day. I suspect that none of us are. So why do we still feel we have to keep up the pretence, and wear a *spiritual* version of a **mask**?



- **the vulnerable Saviour (36-46)**

By contrast, we see a Saviour who cannot cover his vulnerability.

***In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.***

(Hebrews 5:7-8)

So they enter the garden at the foot of the Mount of Olives.

***Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray."***

(Matthew 26:36)

Prayer for Jesus was probably something regular and routine. But not *this* time of prayer. They are at the foot of this local hill. But they are not far from the foot of the cross, and Jesus, at least, is fully aware of this. So, no surprise, really, that ...

***And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled.***

(Matthew 26:37)

Now we hear from his own lips the depth of that ... I think I'd call it near-despair. Think about this: this is *God in person*, desperately longing for human support. Not just "watch": "watch *with me*"

***Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me."***

(Matthew 26:38)

And then he prays the nearest thing he has ever prayed to a *No*. What's going on here? Is it just the horrible shadow of the cross? I could totally understand it, if that was all it was. It was the ultimate deterrent of those days. What benefit could any crime be worth risking, if the price for failure were crucifixion? But that isn't the whole of it.

Perhaps you remember that classic shot from the **Indiana Jones** film, when the hero falls into a pit of ... yes, *snakes*. "**Why did it have to be snakes**" That is something that is particularly repulsive to that particular person. And there was something about the cross which to Jesus, I believe, was even more repellent than the undoubted agonies. What was going to happen on that cross?

***For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.***

(2 Corinthians 5:21)

I don't really know how to describe ...

*What it meant to Thee, the holy one, to bear away my sin*

***He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, ...***

(1 Peter 2:24)

So it's not like Indiana Jones with snakes crawling all over his body. What would it have felt like to have snakes injected *into* his body, such that he couldn't just shake them off, or run away from, to be followed by full-on case of the shakes? To know that these foul creatures were coursing *within* his body ... not that that is possible, of course.

But there was to be no way for Jesus to run away, no way for Jesus to wriggle and turn away from the full moral filth of sin filling his being ... and alienating him from "My Father" ... and not just the loss of separation, but to bear the wrath of the Almighty *Holy* God against sin.

How could the whole being of Jesus not revolt against such a prospect?

***And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."***

(Matthew 26:39)

But there is faith, in that word "nevertheless". We maybe see it prefigured in Job, way back, but taken to the ultimate degree here in Jesus:

***"Though he slay me, I will hope in him; yet I will argue my ways to his face."***

(Job 13:15)

Only Jesus will not plead his own case, unlike Job. He goes *willingly* - even if, as we see here - to this horrible fate, with his eyes wide open. And yet, another sorrow here now. His closest friends have not yet run for their lives. Their bodies, at least, have not left the scene, but ...

***And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping.***

(Matthew 26:40)

And yet even here, when, if ever, you could imagine Jesus losing it with them, he doesn't. Still he speaks gently.

***And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."***

(Matthew 26:40-41)

A bit of a rebuke there, perhaps? *Peter, you'll lay down your life for me? You can't even stay awake with me?* And yet compassion, recognising that there are some ways in which we fail that are not sins, just human weaknesses.

I'd like to come back to that one this evening, too, because sometimes we beat ourselves up about things that we really do not need to. We need to remind ourselves about ourselves - and others around us - that our bodies and our minds are, in probably various ways, liable to weakness from time to time. And we must cut ourselves *and our neighbours* some slack on that account.

But for now, as we close, just come back to the last words that Matthew records Jesus saying here during the Gethsemane prayer. The second and the third times he prayed, we're told, he had revised his words:

***Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done."***

(Matthew 26:42)

Where do you recognise those last four words from? Think back to earlier in Matthew's account. Jesus here is following his own teaching.

***"Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."***

(Matthew 6:9-10)

Even if it is death, your will be done; even if it is the cross, your will be done.

Or else the kingdom of God will *not* come. And there would be no believers around the world to sing

*Hail, thou agonising saviour, bearer of our sin and shame  
By thy merits we find favour; life is given in thy name.*

By his merits ... and

***By his wounds you have been healed.***

(1 Peter 2:24)

So after we have sung one more hymn, let us break bread to remember ... and to worship.